

AND

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

JULY 1952

35¢.



NO TIME FOR TOFFEE! *by Charles F. Myers*

Introducing the

AUTHOR



Charles F. Myers



I'M a native Californian. Have been for thirty years and that's the tip off.

There are certain things about a native Californian that distinguish him unmistakably from the naturalized variety—and perhaps even the residents of the other forty-seven states. He usually hates neckties, shoes, small rooms, books of etiquette, bromides and anything otherwise confining. On the other hand, he likes with a passion an unobstructed view, loud, loose clothing, lots of activity, people who laugh a lot, and anything he can eat in his fingers in a drive-in. In fact, if you entertain him at dinner there is every likelihood that instead of asking you to pass the salt he will flash his lights for service and signal as though mak-

ing a left turn. He will probably laugh at your jokes, even when he's heard them before. He is likely to say whatever comes to mind, though it frequently turns out to be precisely the wrong thing. He'll show up at your party wearing a pla'd shirt and jeans and never have the slightest inkling that he doesn't look just as natty as everyone else. He will describe you as terrific if he likes you and he will like you if you make yourself at home without standing on ceremony. Chances are, he'll like you anyway, just for the hell of it.

That's a native Californian. That's me, as far as I can tell.

As for writing, it just happened where I was concerned. During the war, in service, I discovered that

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Front cover painting by Harold W. McCauley, suggested by "No Time For Toffee!"
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The Editorial

WE take a great deal of pleasure in welcoming a great many new readers to IMAGINATION this issue. During the past year Madge has continued to expand in circulation—which fact makes us very happy indeed—so much so, in fact, that effective with this issue our newsstand distribution is increased by 25%. This means that Madge will be reaching many thousands of new readers in all parts of the country, and also among our good neighbors up in Canada. To our old friends we can only say thanks for your enthusiastic acceptance and approval of Madge, and to our new readers, welcome into the fold and we promise you the best entertainment in the science fiction field!

THIS brings us to another important announcement. Before the end of the year IMAGINATION will step up publication frequency. We've been ironing out difficult production schedules and paper supply problems with our printer and at long last we can see the green light. We know this will be happy news to you, for as one reader put it: "Two months between issues is just too long to wait for a good magazine like IMAGINATION. Please put Madge on a monthly basis!" Well, we plan to do just that, so watch for the formal announcement shortly.

YOU have undoubtedly already noticed our back cover for this

issue. This marks the inauguration of a new photographic feature in Madge, TOMORROW'S SCIENCE. For the first time in the history of science fiction magazines a cover is being devoted to authentic astronomical photographs. We are presenting the feature in such a way that you may clip each photograph for collecting, if you prefer to do so. There will be no type on the photos, and each one will be an unusual interstellar subject. However, while this feature will concern astronomic photography, it will not be confined solely to that field. The title of the feature was carefully chosen so that important developments in the field of science can also be presented. We won't say now just what sort of subjects you can expect in the future, but believe us, when the first space ship is constructed we'll have a staff photographer ready to photograph it! Let us know what you think of this new feature, and if you have any suggestions pass them along. This is your magazine and you have a voice in shaping its policy.

THIS issue also marks the triumphant return of our favorite fantasy girl, Toffee. To old Toffee fans no further introduction is necessary. To those who will be reading their first Toffee story we'd only like to say that the author, Charles F. Myers (he's introduced in person on the second cover) has in our humble opinion inherited the mantle of the late fantasy master, Thorne Smith. This should be enough

to guarantee you some pleasant and hilarious reading. And don't worry about future Toffee stories—the little lady will appear exclusively in IMAGINATION.

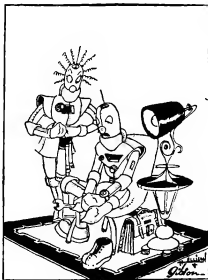
OUR new writing discovery, Daniel F. Galouye, is back again too with another fine story. We have a great deal of confidence in Dan and from the acclaim you've already given him for his fine novel in the May issue we know he's destined for a top spot in popularity. You'll be seeing his stories regularly in Madge. Let us know how you liked his "The Reluctant Hero" in this issue.

WE have noted with considerable interest the recent influx of new science-fantasy magazines in the field. That's a healthy sign for science fiction, for it means that publishers are recognizing the rapid expansion of public interest to our favorite field of literature. Among the best of the new magazines is "Fantastic" issued by Ziff-Davis, our alma mater, and capably edited by Howard Browne, not only one of our closest friends but a darn good editor (and writer) to boot. But say, Howard, we note the new magazine has departed from the customary Ziff-Davis policy of not using or encouraging reprints. How come? There's certainly no dearth of active writing talent today—and much better material certainly than reprint stories of a detective nature.

SPEAKING of new horizons in science fiction we wonder why Hollywood has been marking time the past few months. After the success of "The Thing", "Destination Moon", "The Day the Earth Stood Still", and "When Worlds Collide" we expected rapid followups with

new and equally excellent films. Such, unfortunately, has not been the case. What's the matter, boys, are you too busy admiring the profits? Let's get on the ball. The public is willing—and waiting—to queue up in front of the local marquee. Television may put the skids to the movie industry in general, but science fiction can give it a healthy transfusion . . .

AS we write this editorial the 10th World Science Fiction Convention (to be held in Chicago at the Morrison Hotel over the Labor Day holiday) is only a few months away. We hope you're planning on being there for the fun. And it will be just that with editors, writers, artists, and fans from all over the world. We're looking forward to seeing you there too, so don't disappoint us. WLH



"My plates are killing me!"



JUST as he stepped to the microphone Marc caught sight of the swarthy man. He saw the red scar across the left eyebrow, the dull flash of metal in the large hairy hand. By then it was too late even to cry out. In the next instant the glass panel in the control booth shattered.

Marc felt an explosion of hot pain deep inside his chest. He was aware of looking around dumbly at Dick Drewson and seeing Drewson's face register shocked disbelief. Then the

scene—the room, Drewson and the others—disappeared, engulfed in a blinding sheet of flame—and Marc knew he was falling . . .

* * *

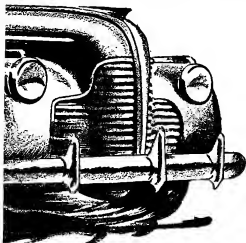
Somewhere, in a place where time and space didn't exist, grey mists began to seeth and swirl, and with all there was an ominous rumbling. The High Council was almost in session.

In a sense, the High Council was

NO TIME FOR TOFFEE!

By Charles F. Myers

Life was Marc's oyster, but: subversives had shot him—a ghost was ready to haunt his corpse—and Toffee was loving him to death!



already in session, for the Heads of the Council had developed their intellects to such an inconceivable degree that when a meeting of the Council was imminent they could send their thoughts on ahead of them and get the meeting under way even before putting in an appearance. There was an exchange of views and information long before the Heads accomplished the mundane and troublesome business of materialization. Thus it was that the mists of Limbo now rumbled

with thought, counter thought and—on this particular occasion—downright aggravation, even before the arrival of the Supreme Head in the vaped chambers. There was an air of foreboding.

Having declined all vanities in the pursuit of the Ultimate Intelligence, the Heads had allowed themselves to evolve into literal representations of their titles. Directing all their energy and development to the brain and its encasement, their bodies had suffered proportionately

so that now they were little more than a group of preposterously large craniums, shaggy with cerebration, bearing faces weighted with the ponderous woe of Life, Death, Eternity and other such mental ballast. Five in all, they made up a company to be avoided whatever the cost.

THE Supreme Head cleared his throat and Eternity rattled with phlegmy discontent. Baleful glances were exchanged all around.

"Well," said the Supreme Head, after a pause for attention. "I suppose you all know the reason for this meeting by now?"

The Second Head, a bald party with large ears, nodded sadly. "You say this blighted Pillsworth has gone and got himself shot this time?"

"Precisely," the Supreme Head affirmed. "In a broadcasting studio, if you please. There's simply no keeping that man out of trouble."

"But why should we want to keep him out of trouble?" the Third Head, an elongated customer with eye pouches, wanted to know. "That's hardly our responsibility."

"There's George Pillsworth," the Supreme Head said fatefully. "Surely you haven't forgotten about George?"

A hush fell over the Council, a hush of horror.

"Not George again?" the Second Head shuddered. "We don't have to face him again, do we?" He looked around beseechingly at the others. "After all, Pillsworth's only injured,

isn't he? He's not dying?"

The Supreme Head looked for a moment as though he wished he had shoulders so he might shrug them hopelessly. "The vibrations are confused again," he sighed. "I don't know what the interference is around Pillsworth, but the call never comes through clearly. All we know is that he's gotten himself into another mess of some sort and is either dead or dying."

"It seems that the subversives are still strongly active in the United States, and of course Pillsworth couldn't stay out of it like a good citizen. He was approached by some men delegated by government authority to take control of national advertising. The theory was that American advertising could be used as a strong combative propaganda weapon against the enemy propaganda already circulating through the country. A committee was delegated to secure the cooperation of the nation's leading advertising agencies. Naturally, since Pillsworth is the nation's leading advertising executive, they contacted him first."

"Then Pillsworth is a subversive?" the First Head enquired. "That's how he got into-trouble?"

"Not at all," said the Supreme Head. "That's just it. Pillsworth wasn't subversive, but the government committee was."

"Eh?"

"Exactly. It turned out that the program was one of the cleverest propaganda schemes ever devised

Actually, their aim was to insert alien ideals into the nation's advertising."

"But you said the plan had government approval."

"That's the really clever part of it. The method of presentation, while seeming on the surface to denounce the foreign creed and uphold the American one, actually was designed to win support for the enemy. The sales psychology employed was of the negative."

"Negative?"

"That's correct. It's the old principle of telling people they don't want a thing until they develop a feeling of defiance and decide they are going to have it. It's an extremely subtle approach, but almost infallible if properly developed. Knowing this, these men had a perfect plan, so subtle that even the government didn't recognize it. Also, they had help from within. A certain Congressman Entwerp pushed through the legislation."

"But Pillsworth saw through it?"

"**I**NSTANTLY," the Supreme Head nodded. "It was a principle he had been using assiduously for years, in fact the very one through which he achieved his success. The whole plot was as clear as a May morn the moment he heard it. That's when the trouble started. He contacted Congressman Entwerp."

"Oh, dear!"

"Indeed. Entwerp responded by

holding Pillsworth up to ridicule."

"But Pillsworth had logic on his side."

The Supreme Head smiled tolerantly. "That's the Earth for you every time," he said. "Show a human a bit of logic and he gets truculent on the spot. Pillsworth was denounced as a witch hunter and instructed under penalty of law to cooperate to the fullest."

"Shocking," the Third Head said. "I beg'n to feel sorry for this Pillsworth."

"Pillsworth was similarly shocked. But he didn't feel sorry for himself. Despite his inclination for the quiet conservative life, he fought back."

"Good," the Fourth Head put in. "I'm glad; it gives the story zip."

"My thought in telling you this," the Supreme Head said caustically, "is merely to inform, not entertain."

"Sorry, sir."

The Head nodded acknowledgment. "But to get on. Pillsworth presented his case to a news broadcaster and asked to be allowed to recite his story to the nation in the interests of national security. He was shot. By whom we do not know; the fellow got away. But the fact we must hold in mind is that he definitely was shot."

"Then it really is serious," the Third Head said. "We may have to interview this deadly George after all."

"It's unavoidable," the Supreme Head sighed. "There's no way

around it."

"But we're not positive Pillsworth is dead yet. Couldn't we wait and be sure?"

"His vibrations have been broken," the Supreme Head said. "Actually we have no cause to hesitate." He sighed. "I suppose we might as well get it over with."

The others nodded in reluctant agreement. There was an oppressive silence.

"But didn't we banish George?" the First Head said. "We must have after his last excursion to Earth."

"That's right," the Second Head agreed. "I remember distinctly. He attempted to fire poor Pillsworth off into outer space without a pressure suit. We banished him to the Void to sing bass in the Moaning Chorus."

"We certainly picked the right party for the job," the First Head reflected. "There isn't a more base spirit in all Limbo. Has he been summoned?"

THE Supreme Head coughed regretfully. "I issued the call through Message Center before I announced the council."

"Oh, dear," the First Head murmured, "then the stinker is practically on the sloop at this very moment."

"The stinker is crossing the sloop even now," the Supreme Head amended, his gaze fastened haughtily on a disturbance in the outer

mists. "Here he comes."

"Secure your valuables," the Second Head said morosely. "And keep your hands in your pockets."

Hesitantly, under the unblinking disapproval of the Council, George materialized. As the Council watched, a duplicate of Marc Pillsworth's long, lean body, made vague by misted robes, rose solidly out of the moiling vapors. It grew to full stature, rounded out at the shoulders, extended a neck, then stopped short of the head. There was an expectant pause, but nothing further developed.

"The rotter's ashamed to face us," the First Head observed sourly.

"Little wonder," the Third Head muttered. "After the way he's blotted the haunting profession, he hasn't got a leg to stand on."

"George Pillsworth," the Supreme Head intoned with exasperation, "spiritual projection of the mortal entity, Marc Pillsworth, approach the Council. And put on your head, you fool."

George stirred, and his head, working from the chin upward, materialized, revealing the face of Marc Pillsworth. All in all, as faces go, Marc's—and consequently also George's—hit very close to average. It was a nice face, a pleasant face, for all its lack of distinction. On George, therefore, it was a misleading face. With its lean plainness, its serious grey eyes and its shock of sandy hair, it failed utterly to express even a whit of George's un-

principled temperament.

"Is that better, sir?" George asked, edging warily forward.

"Hardly that," the Supreme Head groused. "The less of you the better. However it helps us somewhat to get a clue to the inner festerings of that depraved mind of yours." He gazed at George for a long, reflective moment, then made a sad, clucking sound. "I simply cannot imagine what Marcus Pillsworth must have thought when he discovered that his spiritual entity was a tacky, ebony-hearted, feather-headed wretch like you. Why aren't you more like your mortal source?"

George shrugged sheepishly. "I guess I'm just no damn good," he murmured.

"You flatter yourself," the Supreme Head said. "You're much worse than no damn good. You're simply awful. I wonder if Limbo will ever live you down."

"I hope so, sir," George said contritely.

"Nevertheless," the Supreme Head went on, "much as I loathe it, I suppose we must get on with it. I suppose you know why you've been summoned?"

George nodded dimly. "They reported me for teaching the Moaning Chorus to syncopate."

"What!" the Supreme Head gasped. "You did *what*?"

GEORGE looked up, afrighted; he'd given himself away again

with no need. "Yes sir," he sighed resignedly, "I thought that if we got up a good hot act we might be able to wangle a few guest shots with the Celestial Choir. Actually, we've worked out a really sock arrangement of the *Wham Bam Blues*. I'm sure that if you heard it . . ."

"No!" the Supreme Head roared. "You *couldn't*! Of all the unmitigated . . .!" He stopped and waited for his spleen to subside. "George Pillsworth," he said, "you are insufferable."

"I suppose so, sir," George said. "However my intentions . . ."

"Blast your intentions!"

"Yes, sir. I'm very sorry."

"Never mind. In that case it's probably just as well that things are as they are. It'll be a great relief to be rid of you."

"Rid of me?" George said fearfully. "You aren't going to . . .?"

"Unfortunately, no," the Supreme Head sighed. "What I mean is that your mortal part, Marc Pillsworth, has got himself shot."

George looked up sharply. His whole aspect changed; his eye brightened; his entire being grew more alert. "I'm to be sent to Earth as a permanent haunt? Oh, sir . . .!"

"Hold it!" the Supreme Head snapped. "Don't go into a spring dance. There's a hitch."

"Oh," George said, but his eagerness was not noticeably dampened.

To George, the merest prospect of a visit to Earth was only to be re-

garded with rapturous anticipation. To him that distant world of mortals was a place of boundless and exquisite attraction. It was made up in equal parts of liquor, women and larceny and anything else that existed there was merely the result of these things brought together in odd combination. For George, Earth was absolutely the last gasp.

Of course George had never achieved the ultimate accomplishment of establishing permanent residence on Earth, for on all of his previous visits he had arrived only to find that Marc was still alive and that he could not legitimately remain. If on these occasions, George had done his level best to rectify this error with whatever murderous means at hand, it did not imply that the ghost held any personal animosity for Marc. It was simply that George's was the sort of temperament which boggled at almost nothing to achieve its end.

"What's the catch?" he asked.

"Don't be flip," the Supreme Head admonished. "And stop syncopating."

"Syncopating?" George asked innocently. "I'm standing perfectly still."

"It's your mind," the Supreme Head said. "It's jogging about like a cat on hot bricks. It shows all over you. This is an occasion of enormous seriousness."

GEORGE did his best to assume an expression of profound so-

briety. "Yes, sir," he murmured.

"First of all," the Supreme Head continued, "as usual there is some question as to Pillsworth's actual status. He has been shot, it's true, and his vibrations are definitely broken. However, experience has taught us to be wary in the case of Pillsworth. Often we have acted on false alarms in the past and have been sorry." The Head paused and beetled his brow. "Of course we need not have regretted those errors had you behaved yourself at all in the manner of a decent, self-respecting shade. Nevertheless, we don't dare take a chance despite our reluctance in the matter. Pillsworth's wound falls into the mortality class, so we have no alternative but to issue you your travel orders and the usual allotment of ectoplasm." He fixed George with an unhappy stare. "And get that look of evil delight off your face."

"Sorry, sir," George said.

"And make up your mind right now that this is a business trip. If Pillsworth is not dead or definitely dying when you arrive you will return instantly. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And if he isn't dead or dying you will do nothing to alter this state of affairs. You will not undertake on your own initiative to shove him off tall buildings, under moving trucks or into open manholes. You will not threaten him with ropes, guns, explosives, rare poisons or knives, or attempt to dis-

patch him to heaven by means of rocket. Have you got all that straight?"

"Yes, sir," George said quietly. "Hands off. I understand."

"I hope you do," the Head said ominously, "for your own sake. Anyway, I suppose you'd better go along now and start checking out through Supply. All that's left here is for you to raise your right hand and swear by memory to the Ten Commandments of the Hunter's code. However, I suppose you've got them all cribbed on the sleeve of your robe."

George lowered his gaze. "Yes, sir," he murmured. "I have."

"Then skip it," the Head sighed resignedly. "Just clear out."

"Yes, sir," George said, brightening. "Thank you, sir."

As the mists swirled up around George, and he gradually dissolved into their vaporish currents, a joyous grin lighted his face . . .

THREE sets of eyes fastened clinically on the X-ray with worried, professional interest.

"There's a slight chance," the first doctor said, "if we operate immediately."

"Too slight," the second murmured. "The bullet's too close to the heart. He'll die on the table."

"He'll die anyway. We're merely taking the only chance there is."

"I suppose so. Has his wife arrived yet?"

"She's with him now."

"He's not conscious, is he?"

"No, certainly not, but they could not keep her away."

"We'd better explain how it is. We're almost certain to lose him."

"I suppose so."

There was a pause before they turned and reluctantly left the room. Outside, in the hospital corridor, the first doctor proceeded to the door at the end of the hall while the other two stayed behind. He opened the door and quietly stepped inside.

Marc lay still on the bed, his pleasant face drawn and pale against the pillow. Julie sat beside the bed, a classic figure of silent grief, her blond, beauty drained with uncomprehending fright. She did not cry. Nor did she move as the doctor walked toward her from the door.

"Mrs. Pillsworth . . ." the doctor said, but Julie remained motionless. He moved closer to her and placed his hand gently on her shoulder. "We've just seen the X-ray." At this Julie looked up. "We'll have to operate instantly. The preparations are being made now." He paused. "The chances for success are negligible."

Julie nodded dazedly. "I know," she whispered. "I know . . ."

She did not resist as the doctor took her arm and guided her to the door. At the last moment, though, she paused and looked back at the lean face on the pillow.

"He looks so peaceful," she said.

"He looks so content. Does a dying man ever dream, doctor?"

EVEN Marc himself could not have fitted a positive answer to Julie's question. Did he dream? Or had he merely retreated from the world to a realm of absolute reality? He didn't know himself.

He remembered passing through caverns of roaring darkness, only to be caught up by a tongue of searing flame and hurled into some obscure dimness where it seemed that all the thought, melody, all the remembered sensation of a lifetime writhed about him like vague forms, one interposed upon the other, in unpatterned confusion.

But now these entangled vagaries faded away and suddenly he found himself sitting on a green slope at the outer perimeter of a grove of graceful trees. A blue mist drifted lightly up the far rise to soften the horizon. Marc was no stranger to this place for he had visited it often. He felt no dismay at finding himself again in the valley of his own mind. Indeed, through the last few years, it had become as familiar to him as his own home or office. So had the redheaded minx who found her existence there.

Marc stirred and looked around. The landscape was uninhabited. No lovely, lightly clad figure appeared on the horizon, no lithe form emerged from the groves and ran toward him.

Marc frowned anew over the im-

probable fact of Toffee. Certainly she existed in his mind, a constant and consistent product of his imagination. That was perfectly easy to understand. The parts of it, though, that he never quite got used to were her periods of existence outside his mind, in the world of actuality.

What Marc had never been able to really comprehend was that his mind could project into the physical world a physical being—to such an extent that her existence was not only apparent to himself but also to everyone else who came within the radius of the mental vibration which produced the girl.

The question in Marc's mind, then, was whether Toffee really existed, was truly real, or whether she was merely an hallucination, a sort of contagious hysteria.

Toffee's personality always got in the way of the answer. The girl was infinitely distracting, from the pert aliveness of her quick green eyes to the full redness of her lips. Beyond that there was the almost shameful perfection of her supple young body. These things blocked analytical thought. Then, too, there was her unerring instinct for roaring, bounding madness, and her absolute contempt for the logical, the moral or the conservative. Toffee, in brief, was at once brash, embarrassing, impetuous, warm, high-handed, endearing, maddening and completely unforgettable. So to all practical purposes, then, she was

real; the matter of Toffee's source was pallidly unimportant next to the vivid fact of Toffee herself.

Marc stretched luxuriously and got to his feet, but as he did so he peered around toward the green obscurity of the forest. There was still no movement, no sound. He frowned quizzically. This wasn't at all usual. Always before Toffee had been there to greet him almost at the instant of his arrival. Another time she would be swarming all over him by now.

HE shrugged and started aimlessly up the rise. At first he climbed unhurriedly, but as he drew nearer the trees his gait quickened. At the outskirts of the forest he found himself pausing to listen, but there was no sound. The feathery branches swayed in silent grace before him. A small concern began to trickle into his mind.

The blue mists broke smoothly before his stride as he entered the cool enclosure of the forest. Again he paused.

"Toffee . . . ?" he found himself calling.

There was no answer.

He shoved ahead, and now there was a sort of anxiety in his step, and he took care not to break the stillness lest Toffee answer. An odd feeling of bereavement came over him, though he told himself it was foolish. After all, the girl was entirely imaginary, and a pack of trouble into the bargain. Then sud-

denly he stopped.

An odd murmuring seemed to come from the left. He moved in that direction, stopped to listen, then hurried on. Ahead he saw a dim lightness sketched through the trees, a suggestion of a clearing obscured by the dense branches. He approached it, parted the foliage and looked out. He stopped short.

Toffee sat in the middle of the clearing, her legs folded under her. Her eyes were closed and one slender hand was pressed to her forehead in an attitude of labored concentration. Her slight tunic, an emerald transparency at best, did little to conceal the impertinent perfection of her figure. She was leaning forward just a bit, and her flaming hair hung loose over her shoulders. She seemed to be chanting something to herself, though Marc couldn't make it out.

"Toffee . . . ?" he said, and stepped forward to brace himself against the inevitable rush of brash affection.

The girl opened her eyes and looked around hastily.

"Sit down somewhere," she said, "and be quiet."

"Huh?" Marc asked.

Toffee didn't answer. Instead, she closed her eyes, swayed back lightly on her shapely haunches and began the muttered chant anew.

Marc swayed a trifle himself, with astonishment—and perhaps a tinge of disappointment. This wasn't like Toffee at all, not by a long

shot. He moved slowly to her side and gazed down at her intent, upturned face.

"Toffee . . . ?" he hazarded.

She didn't open her eyes. Her lips moved. "Molecules," she said.

"What?" Marc asked.

"Molecules," Toffee repeated. "Molecules . . . molecules . . ."

"Molecules?" Marc said. "What are you talking about?"

Toffee opened her eyes at this and looked up at him with anxious irritation.

"Please be still," she said. "I've got to think about molecules exclusively. It isn't helping any, your gabbing away in my ear."

"But why?" Marc asked. "What about molecules?"

"Everything depends on them, that's all," Toffee said impatiently.

"Now, just . . ."

"But wait a min—!"

"Quiet," Toffee said. "Don't you realize that you're tottering on the brink of death at this very moment? Me, too, for that matter."

"Death?" Marc asked. "What are you talking about?"

TOFFEE looked at him aghast. "Don't you remember?" she asked. "Have you actually forgotten about being shot in the studio?"

Marc stared down at her in growing horror. A small, agonized memory screamed out of the dark inner shadows of his awareness.

"Oh, Lord!" he cried. "I'm dying!"

"And if those licensed butchers get to hacking you up, you're a goner," Toffee said anxiously. "I have the inside information. There isn't much time. I've got to concentrate like wild."

"But . . . !"

"Quiet!" Toffee broke in. "Please be quiet," she closed her eyes again and her lips began to move as before. "Molecules," she murmured.

Marc remained rigid at her side. Panic rose inside him and filled his throat. His impulse was to turn and run blindly—perhaps back to that dying mortal body—but his terror held him transfixed. Staring down at Toffee, he felt he might go mad in the next moment. In the next moment he was certain he had.

Just in front of Toffee, close to the mossy greenness, he caught sight of a quick flicker of light, a strange disembodied illumination that was at once its own source and product. As he watched it flickered again, grew brighter and became a steady radiance. He glanced back at Toffee, but her face had become fixed and masklike. Her lips no longer moved.

The radiance grew swiftly, to an almost unbearable brightness. In it there was a cold hard suggestion of metal. Then it began to take form and solidify. Marc blinked as the thing, whatever it was, grew slowly out of the gleaming brilliance.

First a cylinder emerged, about a foot long and four or five inches in diameter. For a moment the object seemed to have completed itself,

but then, one at either end, a pair of funnel-shaped openings emerged. These completed, a small, two-way switch arrangement appeared at the top and in the center of the cylinder. After that, the radiance was gone and only the strange instrument remained, lying on the grass before Toffee as though cast there by a careless hand.

"What—!" Marc gasped.

Toffee's perky features relaxed. She opened her eyes.

"Did it turn out all right?" she asked brightly. "Is it finished?"

"Huh?" Marc asked. He pointed. "You mean *that*?"

"Oh, wonderful!" Toffee cried, delighted. "It's rather pretty the way it shines, isn't it?"

"What is it?"

"How should I know?" Toffee said blandly. "Just a gadget. There's never been one before."

"You mean you just developed it out of your mind?"

"Sure," Toffee said. "It's a thought product—like me. Now if it only works right . . ." Picking up the instrument, she looked at it carefully and nodded with satisfaction. "It should be simple to operate."

"But what's it for?"

"I'll show you," Toffee said. She pointed to a nearby tree. "See that?" Marc nodded. "Keep looking at it."

TURNING to the tree, she held the cylinder toward it, so that one of the funnels was aimed square-

ly in its direction.

"Now watch," she said, and pressed the switch.

Marc, staring at the tree in rapt attention, started with surprise. Suddenly the tree was gone with no sign that it had ever been there.

"What . . . !"

"The next part is more important," Toffee said.

"Next part?" Marc said dazedly. "But where is it? Where . . . ?"

"See there?" Toffee said, and this time she pointed to the center of the clearing. "Watch."

Holding the cylinder so that the opposite end was pointed to the clearing, she pressed the switch in the other direction. Instantly the tree shot into being exactly at the spot she had indicated.

Marc stared. It was the same tree—the one that had disappeared—and yet it was subtly different. It seemed greener now, more alive.

"What happened?" he asked. "What did you do to it?"

"Molecules," Toffee said, smiling. "I broke it down into molecules, then projected it again. The machine absorbed the tree in molecules, compressed them, reconstructed the faulty or destroyed ones, eliminated all harmful matter and retained the count to reestablish it in perfect balance and health. It worked fine."

"My gosh!" Marc said.

Drawing close to him, Toffee twined her arms around his neck with knowing deliberation and drew his surprised face down close to

hers.

"I'm going to save your stodgy life with molecules, you skinny old, care-worn wraith," she breathed. "Then you'll be in my pay for the rest of your days. Just keep it in mind later when things begin to happen."

"Huh?" Marc said. "What things?"

"You'll see," Toffee said. "Wow!"

Marc drew himself up stiffly. "Now, look here," he said sternly, "you can just get this wow business right out of your head . . ."

"And if that doesn't work," Toffee said, "I've been studying hypnotism. I can transfix a snake at fifty yards." She brushed her cheek lightly against his. "Just think of that, you scaly old reptile."

"Just a second," Marc said. "If you think for one sec—"

But the sentiment was lost as Toffee renewed her hold on his neck and kissed him warmly and at considerable length on the mouth.

"That," she whispered, "is just a token payment in advance. Just wait till the mortgage comes due!"

"Why, you little hussy . . .!" Marc wheezed. "You haven't the moral sense of a brickbat!"

He stopped short, for suddenly the forest had begun to darken and a sharp wind came alive in the trees. He glanced around, startled, as the earth began to tremble beneath them. Instinctively, he whirled about, looking for an escape from



TOFFEE

the forest, but suddenly, with a groan of dismay, the world went black, and he was only aware of Toffee's arms closing tight about his neck . . .

THE orderly was a pale, antiseptic type. And he was resentful. Wheeling Marc along the hallway toward Surgery, he looked down at the drawn face beneath him with a twinge of pique. He strongly resented the fact that the face was not behaving at all as the face of a true corpse-elect should.

According to the orderly, a dying man had no right to twitch and flutter his eyelids the way this one was doing, let alone showing signs of coming completely to life. It made



MARC PILLSWORTH

the orderly nervous and upset.

For a moment the orderly almost succumbed to an impulse to walk off and leave the patient to shift for himself. It was what he deserved if he was going to act that way. Nonetheless, he remained. Consequently, Marc's first vision, upon returning to consciousness, was of a pale, fretful face with white eyelashes and thin lips. He had expected something better.

"Who are you?" he asked weakly. "Are you the doctor?"

The orderly shook his head sullenly. "I'm the orderly. The doctor's waiting."

"They mustn't operate," Marc murmured. "I'll die . . ." He stopped as a pert face suddenly

blurred into view just behind that of the orderly. A slender hand brushed back a wayward lock of red hair. Toffee smiled and winked.

Marc moaned. "Oh, so it's you, is it?" he sighed. "What are you so happy about? I feel awful."

"I'm not happy, sir," the orderly said, mystified. "I'm not happy at all. In fact, if you want the truth . . ." He paused, and the apprehensive expression of one who detects an unseen presence behind him overtook his face. Very slowly, he turned around.

It would be difficult to say what the orderly expected to find behind him: a fanged reptile might have made a good guess, a slavering fiend another. It is certain, however, judging from his reaction, that on the list of things he did not expect to find, a scantily clad redhead was number one. Toffee, her legs crossed to perfection, the cylinder-like gadget under her arm, sat jauntily on the edge of the cart, smiling a bright greeting. The young man leaped backwards and froze in a transfix of amazement.

"Auk!" he exclaimed.

Toffee turned to Marc. "Is he doing a bird imitation?" she asked. "Should I applaud?"

"Don't be funny," Marc said feebly. "I feel terrible."

"I know," Toffee said. "I got here just in time."

"For what?" Marc asked apprehensively. "What are you going to do?"

Toffee patted the cylinder. "I'm going to save your life," she said. "Don't you remember?"

Marc looked at her through heavy lids. "That's silly," he murmured. "Just go 'way and let me die in peace."

Unmindful, Toffee leaped lightly to the floor, stood back and aimed the gadget at Marc. "All set?" she said.

"Here!" the attendant said, suddenly recovering the faculty of speech. "What are you doing?"

"Advancing medical science a mile a minute," Toffee said. "Don't interrupt."

"But . . . !"

TOFFEE placed her hand menacingly on her hip and fixed the young man with a steely eye. "Am I going to have to deal with you?" she asked, "or are you going to button your lip like a good child?"

The orderly spoke no further.

Toffee raised the cylinder, sighting the length of Marc's lean, sheet-covered body. Then she pressed the switch.

The orderly stared, wide-eyed, and repeated his bird imitation. The place where Marc had lain was suddenly as bare as a banquet board after the feast. Where a moment before there had been a long thin man, now there was only a long, thin sheet.

"Hey!" the orderly bleated. "Ho!"

"So long, phrasemaker," Toffee

said, and tucking the cylinder under her arm, moved off quickly down the hall and around the corner.

It was just as the orderly observed the last flirt of Toffee's hip that the doctor appeared from the door of the operating room and looked distractedly in his direction.

"Good grief, man!" he said, "haven't you brought Pillsworth with you?"

The orderly started nervously and looked around.

"He . . . he . . . he . . . !" he gibbered. "That is, she . . . she . . . !" He pointed in hopeless confusion down the hall.

"What are you babbling about?" the doctor enquired shortly. "Where is Pillsworth?"

"He . . . He's gone, sir!" the attendant blurted.

"Gone?" the doctor said. "Where did he go?"

The orderly looked away down the hall. "There was this girl, see . . . she had red hair and a can . . ."

"Now, just a minute, orderly," the doctor said measuredly. "If you think you can distract me with the depressing details of your sex life . . ."

"But you don't understand! She was holding this thing . . . and she told me to shut up . . . and then Mr. Pillsworth wasn't there any more. That's the truth!"

"Let me impress it upon you," the doctor said, "that this is a very serious incident. I can't imagine how a half-dead patient managed to

get away from you, but you'll find him instantly and deliver him to surgery if you know what's good for you. Meanwhile, I'll have the alarm sent out to all the wards and offices. I hope you realize that your carelessness has undoubtedly cost the patient his last chance for life. Without the slightest doubt I can pronounce Marc Pillsworth dead right now."

As the doctor spoke these last words, a small gust of wind—or at least what could easily have passed for a small gust of wind—edded around the corner at the end of the hall. It was this slight disturbance which marked the arrival of George on Earth.

At the sound of the doctor's voice, the ghost stopped, listened, then clasped his hands together in a transport of joy. He had arrived just in time to receive the happy news! Marc was dead and he, George, had at last secured his permanent residency on Earth. Out of sheer exuberance the delighted spectre let out a little moan of delight.

The orderly, who was watching the doctor gloomily out of sight, turned sharply.

"Mr. Pillsworth?" he quavered thinly. "Mr. Pillsworth, please . . .?"

MEANWHILE Toffee had progressed busily along the corridors of the hospital in search of some private—and preferably secluded—place in which to reconstruct Marc. Finally, rounding a

corner, she found herself abreast of a pair of swinging doors and started toward them. She stopped, however, and turned in retreat as the doors suddenly parted and a doctor and nurse, deep in conversation, came into view. She started back the way she had come, but was stopped again by an approaching nurse pushing an elderly female patient in a wheel chair flanked on either side by a crutch. Looking for an avenue of escape, Toffee spotted a white linen screen against the wall and darted quickly behind it to bide her time till the traffic had subsided.

This ruse, on the face of it, hadn't a flaw and should have worked like a charm. It should have that is, if Toffee, in her haste, hadn't plumped against the wall and unknowingly pressed the button of the gadget.

The result of this little accident was that the doctor and the nurse approaching from one direction, and the nurse and the patient coming from the other—all four of them suddenly found themselves confronted by a tall, thin man standing bewilderedly in the center of the hall with nothing to grace his long frame but an extremely brief linen shift loosely attached at the back. Toffee had released Marc into reality and good health, but costumed only for the operating table.

No one was more acutely aware of this deficiency than Marc himself. Looking around unhappily at his stunned beholders and taking in his slight coverage all in a single glance,

he was taken with a seizure of shocked modesty. Hunkering down into a squat he clutched the hem of his gown desperately to his knees.

"My word!" the elderly patient said, leaning forward in her chair. "What in the world does that man think he's doing!"

"I don't like to think," the nurse said, looking away. "It's bound to be something disgusting."

"Here you!" the doctor called from the other end of the corridor. "You can't do that! Why are you crouched down in that obscene way?"

"I'm naked!" Marc wailed. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I'm downright exposed!"

"There's no reason to whisper about it," the doctor said nastily. "We can all see."

"Oh, my gosh!" Marc cried. Looking around for a retreat, his frantic gaze fell on the screen. Still in a squat, he hobbled swiftly toward it.

"Look at him!" the patient cried, rising slightly in her chair. "Here, you! Stop doing that, for heaven's sake! You look like an ailing duck!"

"That's nothing to what I'd look like if I stood up," Marc panted in one last sprint for the screen. "That would be worse."

IT was not until this point in the proceedings that Toffee began to realize what had happened. Listening to the voices in the hall, it had

struck her that one of them had a dreadfully familiar ring to it. It was much to her dismay that, in peering around the edge of the screen, she suddenly found herself practically eyeball to eyeball with Marc. She let out a small, strangled cry.

"Oh, my gosh!" she said.

"For Pete's sake, let me in there!" Marc said.

"But how did you get out there?"

"How should I know? Never mind that, let me in. They're all *looking!*"

"At what?"

"I shudder to think. Please let me in!"

"But why are you all doubled up like that?"

Tired of words, Marc reached up to the screen to pull it away so he could get behind it. Unfortunately, it was at this same instant that Toffee decided to shove it open to make room. With their combined efforts, the screen buckled, folded, teetered and fell, cracking Marc solidly on the head. The next moment found him in an unconscious sprawl on the floor. The area behind the screen was starkly deserted. The observers crowded in swiftly to see what had happened.

"Good God!" the doctor cried, staring down at Marc. "It's Pillsworth, the man they're looking for in Surgery!"

"Is he dead?" the nurse asked.

The doctor shook his head. "He's breathing. Run and call an orderly

to take him along instantly. Hurry!"

As the nurse hurried off, the elderly patient removed one of the crutches from the side of her chair and passed it experimentally through the vacant area beyond the screen. She shook her head in perplexity.

"By golly," she said, "I could have *sworn* he was talkin' to somebody back there."

WHILE this untimely denouement was rounding out in the hallway, a mad drama of another sort was beginning to ferment in the Pharmacy.

Olliphant Gunn, the rotund and habitually foggy keeper of the dopes and drugs, had been watching it for several minutes; there was trouble brewing in the Salts and Syrups—trouble of a most mysterious and upsetting nature. The containers, for all the world as though they had suddenly been endowed with some idiotic life of their own, had begun to shift about all by themselves. Watching a jar of salts hurl itself to the floor and splash its contents out in a whitish mess, Olliphant Gunn concluded definitely that there was some sort of flimflam afoot.

This conclusion was stoutly strengthened as he witnessed the progress of his private bottle from its hiding place amongst the medicants to a position in mid-air in front of the shelves. Olliphant began to quiver about the dewlaps. He quivered even more as the bot-

tle uncapped itself, tilted upward and emptied a noticeable portion of its contents into—into absolutely nothing at all!

Olliphant fell back in his chair, slack of jaw, and it is doubtful, had anyone been able to apprise him of the truth of the matter, that he'd have felt any better about it. To a man in his cups, as Olliphant was, the news does not come lightly that he is in the company of a thirsty ghost, with an unerring nose for whiskey, and a predisposition for celebration.

Olliphant watched in bleary disbelief as the bottle repeated the tilting and emptying process. Then his mood began to change. Regardless of what this obviously demented bottle thought it was up to, it had no right to deplete his private reserves in this callous fashion. The slack jaw of Olliphant Gunn hitched itself up and became firm.

"Stop that!" Olliphant roared. "You stop that right now, damnit!"

For a moment the bottle wavered, as though startled, then defiantly upended a third time and brought the level of the coveted liquor down still further. Quite as though to rub salt in the wound, it burped with grandiose satisfaction.

"Damnation!" Olliphant gasped. "I'll teach you, you blathering bottle!"

Heaving his considerable bulk up out of his chair, he hurled himself bodily toward the object of his wrath.

THE laws of nature, however, were against Olliphant from the very beginning. As the bottle darted out of his reach, sheer momentum carried him headlong into the dim reaches of Salts and Syrups. Gravity delivered him along with a quantity of gummy liquid and gritty crystallines to the floor. Settled in a sticky puddle of wreckage, Olliphant glanced around with a reddish, enraged expression. Besides salt and syrup, there was blood in his eye.

At a distance sufficiently out of reach, yet insultingly near, the bottle was bobbing about amusedly. Indeed, Olliphant distinctly heard a soft chuckling sound coming from its direction. With a jungle roar he surged up from the floor and launched a second attack. This netted him another disastrous collision, this time with the glassware department. The Pharmacy was swiftly being transformed into a scene of chaos.

In the interval, the bottle had retreated to a position by the doorway and was humming maddeningly to itself. Suddenly it burst into full-throated song.

"Goin' to Louisiana," it warbled, "for a case of good whis-kee! Goin' to Louisiana with a hussy on mah knee!"

Olliphant settled himself sadly on an untidy mound of rubble and began to brood. There was no use denying it; the thing was just too much for him. As he watched the

bottle bog back and forth in time with the idiot song, a large tear trickled down his cheek. Olliphant Gunn was just a broken reed in the holocaust of Life, and his ruination had come about through a mere mad bottle. The man began to blubber hopelessly.

It was during this heart-rending climax that the nurse, a small blonde, appeared at the doorway and stared into the pharmacy with large wondering blue eyes.

The invisible George, who had been enjoying his own singing to the utmost, stopped at the sight of the newcomer in mid verse. Things, he decided, were beginning to look up. Warmed by the liquor, George was dazzled and enchanted.

Unfortunately the nurse was neither of these. Striding through the door, she stepped into a trickle of syrup and skidded dangerously toward Olliphant. George, feeling that things were moving in the wrong direction entirely, seized upon the floundering blonde with one deft swoop of his invisible arm and lifted her to dry ground. It was a moment before he was able to account for the girl's shrill screams.

A period of stupefied silence followed as the nurse glanced around suspiciously. As a girl who, in line of business, had experienced considerable traffic with men, she was disposed to know to the exact moment when she had been forcibly clutched by a masculine hand. Also, which only made matters worse, she

was a girl who knew where she had been clutched and why.

IN looking around for masculine hands available for clutching, a quick survey told the nurse that the room inventoried two and both of them were the exclusive property of Olliphant Gunn. Geographically it seemed impossible that either of these hands could have performed the recent clutching, but in her anger the nurse was not the one to quibble over details. Seizing up a large crystal beaker she unhesitatingly smashed it to splinters on Olliphant's skull with one smart whack. Olliphant looked up through his tears.

"What you wanna do that for, lady?" he sobbed.

"You know what for," the nurse gritted, looking around for further ammunition. "And that's only the beginning. If you ever . . ." She stopped as she suddenly encountered the floating bottle. Instinctively, or perhaps out of sheer surprise, she grabbed for it. At any rate, it was not until she had gotten a grip on the thing that she realized that this was a bottle not properly on the up-and-up. This fact was brought home to her even more clearly when the bottle refused to budge in her grasp and even showed a definite tendency to pull away.

For a long moment the nurse merely stared at the bottle with a wondering gaze. Then slowly an ex-

pression of determination came into her pretty face. Squaring her stance, she took hold of the offending container with both hands.

"It's no use," Olliphant said from the floor. "That bottle's mean."

Heedless, the nurse braced herself and tugged with all her strength. The bottle gave by a foot, then lurched drunkenly in her grasp. Down on the floor the rivulet of syrup became disturbed, as though feet were churning through it desperately seeking to regain lost traction.

Suddenly the bottle gave way and the nurse toppled backwards into Olliphant's lap. Olliphant received this new burden with resignation and a grunt. Across the room, however, there was another sound, as of a body coming in swift contact with the floor.

"Damn!" the nurse said hotly, turning to Olliphant. "Keep your big oafish hands off me! Stop reaching."

"I'm only reaching for the bottle," Olliphant said. "It's mine."

"It didn't feel like it," the nurse retorted. "It felt more like . . ." She hesitated as from the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of a long body sprawled on the floor. At first glimpse it seemed that the body had no head, but as she looked more closely she saw that it did, though she had the peculiar sensation that it had just come into being. Handing Olliphant the bottle she got to her feet and approached

the prone figure. Noting that it was dressed for surgery, she stood staring down at it quizzically for a moment.

"Holy smoke!" she breathed. "It's Pillsworth!" She turned to Olliphant. "Come on and help me. We've got to get him down to Surgery right away!"

MARC felt himself rising through the last shredded mists of unconsciousness. He tried to open his eyes but a glaring light made the attempt too painful.

"Give him the anaesthetic," a voice said close by.

Panic pulsed through Marc's body. They were going to operate! Necessity gave him a surge of strength and he sat up, staring wildly at the three doctors gathered over him.

"No!" he said. "Don't! I'm all right!"

"Lie down, Mr. Pillsworth," the doctor nearest advised. "Just lie down and it will all be over with in a minute."

"But I'm all right!" Marc said desperately. He glared around at the nurse holding the mask for the anaesthetic. "Get away from me!"

"Hysteria," the doctor said. "Quite understandable after what he's been through. He'll have to be restrained."

The other two nodded in agreement. Watching Marc closely, they took up positions on either side of him. The first doctor moved to a

place at Marc's feet.

"When I give the signal," he whispered, "we'll all grab at once."

"I heard that!" Marc yelled. "Stay away from me, you croakers, or I'll . . . !"

"Okay!" the doctor cried. "Grab!"

The scene over the operating table, for a moment thereafter, was a living abstraction in flailing arms and legs. Though Marc managed at one point to insert his thumb into the eye of the first doctor and his foot into the mouth of the second, the odds were too great against him. In the end he found himself pinioned helplessly to the table.

"All right, nurse," the doctor said, "fit the mask to his face. As soon as the body's relaxed . . ."

"You leave that body alone," a pert feminine voice said tartly. "That body happens to belong to me, for what it's worth, and I don't want it tampered with. I particularly don't want it relaxed. I want it alert and twitching in every fibre, and if you don't leave it alone I'm going to lay into the bunch of you bare fisted!"

A tense silence overtook the group around the operating table. The doctors looked at each other, then turned to observe the dismaying red-head who had mysteriously appeared just behind them.

"How did you get in here?" the first doctor said uncertainly.

"I'm the owner of that body you are flinging about there," Toffee

said hotly, shifting the gadget under her arm and placing a hand on her hip. "That body's mine right down to the last molecule and I've come to fight for it if I have to."

MARC sat up under the relaxed grips of the doctors, his face scarlet. "Why do you have to go around telling people things like that?" he asked plaintively.

"I could put it another way," Toffee said. "Dirtier. For instance..."

"No!" Marc cried. "It's dirty enough already."

The doctor turned to Marc. "Who is this woman?"

"I don't know," Marc lied quickly. "I've never seen her before in my life. Why don't you throw her out of here?"

"Why, you lying old ingrate!" Toffee flamed. "For two cents I'd climb up there on that table and perform a few operations of my own!"

"Madam!" Marc said distantly, "whoever you are, do you really think you ought to take on in public in this brazen way?"

"I'll take you on in public, no holds barred, you thin-nosed phony," Toffee gritted. "You don't know what brazen is yet!"

The doctor turned to the nurse. "Call the orderlies and have this woman removed," he said. "And have them give her a blanket or something to wear. We can't delay the operation another moment.

I'll give the anaesthetic myself."

"Hey!" Marc yelled. "Toffee..."

"Go ahead, doctor," Toffee said with evil satisfaction. "Rip him open. Slit him from ear to ear and top to bottom. I won't lift a finger."

"No!" Marc cried. He turned to Toffee in panic. "It'll mean the end of both of us!"

"Pardon my girlish laughter," Toffee said. "It's worth it, dogmeat, to see you get yours after the way you've treated me. Either you fork over that lanky frame of yours, or you're going to be out of frames entirely. That's the way it stacks up."

"Do you have to be so vulgar about it all?" Marc asked weakly. "With all this talk about bodies and frames, I'm beginning to feel like just so many soup bones displayed on a counter."

"That's exactly the parallel I've been searching for," Toffee said complacently. "In fact if there's anything vulgar in all this, it is your body. Come to think of it, it suddenly strikes me as so vulgar I'm no longer interested in it."

"Please!" Marc cried as the doctors gripped him to the table. "Use that gadget of yours—anything! Please!"

"Sorry, son," Toffee said. "I guess you'll remember after this never to forget a lady's name."

Marc looked up and saw the mask bearing down toward his face. "Toffee!" he yelled. "For Pete's sake!"

THE mask miraculously paused in its descent, stopped. The action around the table came to a sharp halt. Eyes swiveled toward the door. Marc turned on his side just in time to observe Olliphant Gunn lumbering into the room under the weight of George's upper quarters.

The nurse, her blond hair in a state of dishevelment, followed bearing the feet and legs. Arriving at a position inside the door, they deposited their burden on the floor where it instantly curled over on its side and emitted a sodden snore.

"It's Mr. Pillsworth," the nurse said breathlessly, shoving back her hair. "We brought him straight down without waiting for the orderlies." She looked up into the stunned faces staring back at her from around the table. Then her gaze fell to Marc.

"My God!" she gasped.

"Good Lord!" Marc groaned, taking in the stupid, smiling face of George.

"Jesus!" breathed the doctor.

"Amen," Toffee put in glibly. "Who's taking up the collection?"

Marc turned to Toffee. "It's that gosh-awful spook again!" he breathed. "He would have to show up now!"

"Actually," Toffee said, "he could not have shown up at a better time. I really was going to help you out, but now we have George."

Marc's eyes brightened with slow realization. "Of course," he said,

then turned as he felt the doctor's hand on his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Mr. Pillsworth," the doctor said tensely. "You *are* Mr. Pillsworth, aren't you?"

Marc smiled with hypocritical innocence. "No," he said. "That's what I've been trying to get through your thick skull." He pointed to George. "That's Pillsworth there on the floor. And if you ask me he's in a pretty critical condition. You'd better start sawing away at him right now before he pops off of natural causes and robs you of the sport."

"Oh, my word!" the doctor gasped. "How can I ever tell you . . . !"

"Come," Marc said grandly, turning to Toffee, "let's leave this blood-splattered slaughter house."

"I'm all for it," Toffee said gaily. "Let's flee."

"I thought you didn't know that woman," the doctor said confusedly.

"I begin to recognize her now," Marc replied urbanely. "It was my horror at the crass brutality of the medical profession that drove her tender memory from my mind."

"But, I . . ." the doctor began hopelessly.

"Say no more," Toffee said airily. "You can tell your side of it in court."

THE two of them, linking arms, started toward the door. They were just about to sweep out of the room when suddenly the situation hit a new snag. It was at this junc-

ture that George opened his eyes, waggled them around woozily, then reared up in a sitting position, staring at Marc.

"You!" he said with a strangled gasp. "You're alive!" The way he said it, it sounded like a hideous accusation:

Marc stopped short, caught off guard. "Of course I'm alive," he said.

"But you can't be!" George wailed, great tears of awful disappointment welling in his eyes. "It isn't fair! You *have* to be dead!"

"I'm sorry," Marc said, somewhat at a loss. "I'm not."

"It's rotten," George said with drunken bitterness. "It's cruel. I'm probably the only ghost alive who's haunted by a human!"

"Well, it's a distinction," Toffee offered hopefully.

"Just a minute," the doctor put in suspiciously. "What's going on here? What are you people talking about?"

Marc nodded sadly toward George. "The poor chap's delirious," he said. "We're only trying to humor him."

"Oh, yeah?" the doctor said. His gaze moved from Marc to George and back to Marc again. "Just which one of you really *is* Marc Pillsworth?"

Marc and George pointed at each other in unison. "He is!" they chorused.

The doctor passed a trembling hand over his forehead and lifted his gaze to the ceiling. A tremor of

frustration passed through his sturdy frame. He turned to the small blonde.

"Is Mrs. Pillsworth still in the waiting room?" he asked.

"I believe so, sir," the nurse said.

"Will you please call her in here to make an identification?"

"No!" Marc said, glancing uneasily in Toffee's direction. "Don't do that . . . ! I mean there's no need to disturb Mrs. Pillsworth. Obviously this pitiful creature here on the floor is Pillsworth. Just by looking at him you can see he's under the weather."

At this George drew himself up sedately, stiffling a hiccough. "Nothing of the sort," he said piously. "I'm in perfectly splendid condition."

"Go ahead, nurse," the doctor said firmly. "Bring Mrs. Pillsworth."

"Yes, sir," the nurse said, and departed.

"But, you can't afford to delay the operation that long," Marc said. "You said so yourself. Anyone with half an eye can see that this poor man is getting more feeble by the second. You owe it to him to slit him open immediately . . . !" In speaking Marc had paused to look at George. The result was that the words froze on his lips. Never had he spoken more truly; George was not only getting more feeble but more non-existent by the second. His legs had evaporated to the knees, his arms were entirely gone.

Where his eyes should have been there were now only empty sockets. Staring at this awesome demonstration, the doctor tottered slightly and braced himself against the operating table.

"Oh, good Lord!" he moaned.

"Stop that, you coward," Marc said angrily. "Stop sneaking out like that!"

IN response, George merely dissolved his head to a grinning skull. "Gotta go now," he chortled hollowly. "Gotta be corking off." He turned to the others and clacked his teeth menacingly. Olliphant Gunn was the first to snap.

"There's just so much that human flesh and blood can stand," the poor man wailed, and leaping to the operating table he snatched up the anaesthetic mask and plunged it over his face.

"Come on," Toffee said urgently, tugging at Marc's sleeve. "Let's get out of here before that cheap ghost sticks us with an operation."

Marc jolted into action. Under Toffee's guidance, he lunged out the door and started down the hall.

"Let's leave this place," Toffee said. "Let's go somewhere where we can have fun."

"We can't leave like this," Marc said, indicating their brief attire. "We can't go out on the street half naked."

"We can say we're artists' models on our way to work," Toffee said. "Come on."

Marc didn't pause to debate the point as a cry from the operating room indicated that the doctors had recovered from their dismay with an urgent sense of loss.

Together, he and Toffee began to run. They proceeded swiftly around a corner and down a flight of steps to the floor below. Suddenly Marc stopped.

"What's wrong?" Toffee asked.

"Listen," Marc said. "What's that?"

Toffee listened. Descending footsteps sounded on the stairs behind them. She whirled about. The stairway was unoccupied.

"George," she said disgustedly. "He's following us."

The footsteps stopped guiltily.

"Okay," Marc said, addressing himself to the empty stairs. "It's no use pretending you're not there. You might as well show yourself."

A subdued hiccough echoed out of the emptiness, but that was the extent of George's communication.

"If you're entertaining any notion of bumping me off so you can stay here," Marc warned, "just forget it. I'm alive and I intend to stay that way."

"Just ignore him," Toffee said. "He's bound to get bored and go away if we refuse to pay any attention to him."

THE discussion went no further, for suddenly there were sounds of approaching pursuit from above. Grabbing Toffee's arm, Marc raced

ahead, down the hall and around another corner. A third set of footsteps continued to sound in their wake.

"He's still with us," Toffee panted.

"The vulture," Marc said. "He's just hoping they'll catch me. Run faster."

Renewing their efforts, they left behind another stretch of corridor, turned another corner. There they stopped abruptly. Ahead a group of orderlies loomed before them.

"That's them!" a young athletic type yelled. "That's Pillsworth!"

"To hell with Pillsworth!" a companion responded. "Get the dame! She's practically all skin, just like they said!"

Marc and Toffee darted back around the corner.

"Surrounded!" Toffee panted. "I think that sums up the situation."

"What'll we do?" Marc asked confusedly.

Toffee pointed to a door marked JANITOR'S CLOSET. "In there," she said. "Quick!"

They ran to the door, threw it open and darted inside just as their pursuers surged into view at either end of the hallway. They paused in the darkness to listen. As the sounds of the chase continued outside they turned their attention to their new surroundings. The air was close with the heady aroma of cleaning fluid, wax polish and disinfectant.

"Isn't there a light in here?" Tof-

fee asked.

"I can't find one," Marc said. "I've looked all over."

"Well," Toffee said, "at least it's a place to relax for a bit and catch our breath. I just wish it didn't smell so oppressively clean. I was hoping for a bit of dirt tonight—of the right sort, of course."

"You stay on your side of the closet," Marc said, "and I'll stay on mine."

"We'll never get anywhere that way," Toffee said. "Suppose Romeo had taken that attitude with Juliet?"

"They'd both have lived a lot longer," Marc said.

"I suspect that George is in here with us," Toffee said. "I fancy I hear him breathing back there amongst the mops and brooms."

"I suppose he is," Marc said. There was a pause, followed by a number of rattling sounds. "What are you doing?"

"There's a whole shelf of bottles over there," Toffee said. "I'm just sniffing about to see if there's anything interesting. And there is. The janitor has strong tastes. Irish whiskey, I should judge, by the jolt of it. Have some?"

MARC paused, took note of the new vapors overriding those of the cleaning fluids.

"Well," he said, "it is a little drafty in this nightgown."

Toffee handed him the bottle in the darkness. "Bottoms," she said

pleasantly.

"The expression," Marc said sedately, "is bottoms up."

"Up or down," Toffee said, "it doesn't matter. I was just tossing in bottoms at random. Assorted bottoms, so to speak. If you prefer them up, you'll get no argument out of me."

There was a smacking sound as Marc lowered the bottle from his lips. "Let's just skip the bottoms," he said, "and go on to something else."

"Sounds pretty giddy," Toffee mused, "all this leaping about over bottoms. However . . ."

"Look outside," Marc suggested wearily, "and see if they're still out there."

"Okay," Toffee said. A small shaft of light darted in and out of the closet as she opened the door and closed it again. "They're churning about like cattle in a loading chute," she reported. "Where are you?"

"Sitting on the floor," Marc said. "I'm beginning to find this place restful."

"You're beginning to stink of Irish whiskey," Toffee said. "Stop gulping at that bottle like a great fish and hand it back."

"I wonder if we should offer George a drink?" Marc said with growing amiability. "I definitely heard him breathing back there just now. Sounds a trifle wheezy, I'm afraid."

"I think we ought to banish

George from our minds," Toffee said. "Besides, now that I've got the bottle back I don't intend to be free about handing it around for quite some time."

"All right," Marc said. "Have it your way. George is banished."

There was a prolonged period of contented silence, broken intermittently by faint gurgling sounds, first from one side of the closet then the other. It was Toffee who finally spoke.

"By the way," she said, "what was all that nonsense about your getting yourself shot?"

"Oh, that," Marc said negligently. "It's a bunch of subversives. They have a subtle plan to poison the minds of the public against the government—with the government's permission. I went on the air to expose them, but they had me shot to stop me. There was this dark fellow with a scar over his left eye in the control booth . . ." He paused. "Holy smoke! I forgot. This is serious business, isn't it?"

"It sounds like it," Toffee said. "How far did you get in your broadcast?"

"I didn't even get started. I suppose I ought to try to do it again."

"If they think you're dead or dying, they won't be watching for you any more."

"That's right," Marc said. "Let's get out of here."

"Okay," Toffee said. "Just take your arms away from my waist so

I can get up."

"Huh?" Marc said. "I don't have my arms around your waist."

"You haven't!" Toffee said. "Didn't you take the gadget from under my arm either?"

"Of course not."

"It's that sneaky George," Toffee snorted. "And when I think of how I was enjoying it . . . !" She turned in the darkness. Let go of me before I lose my temper, George. So help me, you spurious spectre, I'll twist your head off when I get ahold of you."

There was no answer but apparently the threat had taken hold; there were sounds of Toffee getting to her feet.

"That'll hold him," she said. "Look outside and see how things are. I want that gadget back."

Marc fumbled his way to the door, opened it a crack, then shoved it all the way open.

"All clear," he said and turned back to Toffee. "Can you see him back there? Is he visible?"

"I can just make him out," Toffee said, peering into the back of the closet. "He's sort of lurking."

"Okay, you rat," Marc said. "Come out of there and give it to us. Snap into it."

There were shuffling sounds from the shadows and slowly a figure emerged into the light. It was a dark, heavy figure. The face was swarthy and there was a scar over the left eye. The man leered at the two in the doorway.

"Okay," he said. "Keep your shirts on. I'm going to give it to you all right. I'm going to give it to you good."

He moved closer. In his left hand was Toffee's gadget, in his right an enormous revolver.

THE swarthy man closed the door to the storeroom, locked it, and shaking his head, moved purposefully down the hallway to a door at the front of the warehouse. He stopped and knocked, and as an unintelligible grunt issued from inside, he opened the door and entered.

"I got 'em," he announced.

Across the room a portly gentleman with a white mane and great shaggy black eyebrows looked up from a sheaf of papers on the desk before him.

"Them?" he said. "I told you just to pick up Pillsworth and finish him off."

The swarthy man glanced away, embarrassed. "I couldn't finish him off, congressman. He wasn't even started. I went to the hospital, like you told me, to make sure about Pillsworth—and I was going along the hall lookin' for this place where they cut 'em up—and all of a sudden there was a racket like a lot of people runnin' around and yellin', so I ducked into this closet to keep under cover. Well, I was only in there a little bit when all of a sudden somebody yanks the door open and this guy and this dame

come shaggin' in with hardly any clothes on. So I kept quiet and listened."

"I'm not interested in the sordid doings behind the scenes at the hospital," Congressman Entworp interrupted. "Stick to the pertinent facts."

"Oh, no, it wasn't nothin' like that. I just listened and pretty soon it come up in what they were sayin' that this guy with the dame is none other than Pillsworth himself. And believe me, congressman, I can't explain it, but there ain't a thing wrong with him—physically."

"Physically?" the congressman asked. "What do you mean?"

"The guy's mentally a mess," the thug said. "So's this dame with him. She's a terrific lookin' little job, but crazy as a coot. It's a dirty shame."

"How do you know they're crazy?"

"Just ask Hank. He drove the car. All the way over from the hospital they kept talkin' to this guy who wasn't there, and bawlin' him out for followin' them everywhere. They called him George, and they carried on a regular conversation with him. It was weird, leave me tell you. But one thing, this guy George, whoever he is, is lucky he doesn't exist; the way that little dame kept tellin' him what she was going to do to him if he didn't show himself and help them out of this jam was enough to curl your hair. Pillsworth was all the

time tellin' this imaginary character what a ghoul he was to be hangin' around just to see him get killed. They're both nuts, boss, an' no lie!"

"Maybe it was just an act," Congressman Entworp suggested skeptically.

"I don't think so. You'd really have to feel mean to say some of the stuff those two was dishin' out to this George." The thug paused and withdrew Toffee's thought gadget from his pocket. "Look what I lifted off the dame in the closet." He placed it on the desk before the congressman. "She's plenty hot to get it back. You'd think it was somethin' worth somethin'."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Some sort of two-way flashlight, I guess. Just a piece of junk."

THE congressman bent his shaggy head close over the gadget and examined it minutely. He picked it up, weighed it in his hand, then shrugged and dropped it negligently into his pocket.

"Let's have a look at these two crackpots," he said, rising from his chair. "We'll have to dispose of them, of course."

"Okay," the thug said. "I just hope they've got things settled with this George before we get there."

Back in the storeroom, however, events were lurching ahead in a most uncertain manner. Things had started with an air of mild

strangeness and mounted swiftly to a state of wild-eyed madness.

Finding themselves confined and in the hands of blood-thirsting murderers, Marc and Toffee had paused only momentarily to survey their musty prison, the cases of wines, brandies and whiskies stacked along the walls, before returning to the subject uppermost in their minds. Toffee, doubling her fists, addressed herself to the room at large.

"George," she said evenly, "we know you're with us. You gave yourself away in the car when you let that foot materialize, and you'll give yourself away again. And when you do, brother, I'm going to kick your teeth out one at a time and have them made into shirt studs. I'm going to . . . !"

"It's no use threatening him," Marc interrupted. "He's got the advantage. He's just hanging around waiting for me to be killed. And he'll probably have his way before they're done with us."

In answer, a stifled yawn echoed from somewhere in back of them. Toffee whirled about.

"Listen to him!" she fumed. "Now he's rubbing it in! That was the most put-on yawn I ever heard."

She started forward, but Marc put out a hand to stop her. He drew her toward the corner.

"Listen," he said in lowered tones, "I've just thought of something. Maybe we can trap him."

"We certainly should be able to," Toffee agreed hotly. "George is

pure rat, through and through. If we only had some cheese . . ."

"What about whiskey?" Marc asked. "There's plenty of it here, and where George is concerned it's the best bait in the world."

"I wonder why he hasn't been at it already?" Toffee said, surveying the crates along the walls. "The place is practically seething with the stuff."

"He's too smart," Marc said. "He doesn't want to show where he is. By the time he opened a crate and got the bottle out we'd have him located. He's afraid we'd slug him."

"Of course we'd slug him," Toffee said. "I personally intend to bop the living bejesus out of him at the very first opportunity. What difference does that make?"

"He knows what we're after," Marc explained. "He knows we want him to show himself to these people so they won't know which one of us is me. And look what happened to George the last time he was knocked out."

TOFFEE looked up with a smile of understanding. "Of course!" she said. "He lost control of his ectoplasm and materialized."

"Exactly," Marc said, "and it might happen again. Then it would not be just a matter of confusing them with the two of us. If George materialized we could leave him to take the rap all by himself."

"Wonderful!" Toffee said. "Let's do it. It would serve everybody

right. How do we trap him?"

"It's simple," Marc said. "We open the crates and get the bottles out *for* George. At first we pretend to forget about him; we sit around and act like we're swilling down whiskey by the gallon and having the time of our lives. This will drive George close to madness, locked in a room with two drinkers and no drop for himself. When we figure he's sufficiently worked up, we'll weaken and offer him a drink. He won't be able to resist. While one of us hands over his bottle, the other takes a fix on George's position and bashes the daylights out of him with his." Marc permitted himself a smile of pride. "You see?"

"Marvelous," Toffee said. "I particularly love that part at the end, where George gets bashed. Can I be the basher?"

"Okay," Marc agreed. "Let's go. And remember, act as though you've never enjoyed drinking anything so much in your whole life."

With tremendous nonchalance, the two moved across the room to the stacked crates.

"My, my," Marc said in a declamatory, radio announcer's tone, "what do you suppose we have here in all these interesting-looking crates?"

"I should think," Toffee said on cue, "that they contain bottles of fine old tangy whiskey. Of course that's just a random guess, but I believe it's a shrewd one. Shall we have a look?"

"Oh, let's!" Marc cried, with a false grin of eagerness. He turned slightly in what he presumed to be George's direction. "A drink of fine old tangy whiskey would certainly taste mighty good just now."

"I can think of nothing better!" Toffee said, smacking her lips loudly. "My mouth fairly waters!"

Marc reached one of the crates down and, placing it on the floor, pried up one of the slats. He reached out two bottles and handed one toward Toffee.

"Well, well," he cried with studied joviality. "Look what I found!"

Toffee clapped her hands after the manner of a witless child. "Oh, goody!" she gurgled. "Some of that wonderful fine old tangy whiskey! Just what I hoped for!" She took the bottle, opened it and took a swallow. She blanched and covered her face with her hand. "Ugh!" she rasped.

"Yes, sir!" Marc said, lifting his bottle to his mouth. "Some of the finest, oldest and tangiest fine old tangy whiskey there is." He rolled his eyes in broad anticipation. "Yes, sir, bedad!"

"It's a good thing you said that before you tasted the stuff," Toffee hissed between clenched teeth. "You'd never have the breath afterward."

THE warning came too late; Marc had already downed a large swallow. He closed his eyes and gagged. Like Toffee, however,

he forced a frozen smile through his tears and rubbed his stomach luxuriously. "Umm - umm," he managed to say. "It sure hits the spot."

"And leaves it in ruins," Toffee agreed. "They must cook this stuff up in old lye vats."

"Keep drinking," Marc whispered urgently. "And look happy."

"Okay," Toffee said grimly. "I'll die with a smile on my face, but it'll be the lie of the century." She lifted the bottle gamely and drank. "Oh, boy!" she rasped through drawn lips, "this whiskey is the answer to a drunkard's prayer."

Marc drank dutifully in turn. "You said it!" he announced, tears streaming from his eyes. "It's delicious!"

"I could go on drinking it forever," Toffee wheezed, taking another gulp and clutching her throat. "It's so smooth!"

"Makes you want more and more," Marc said, shaking his head to clear it after a third libation. "It gives you a real boost."

"Let's not carry it too far," Toffee whispered. "If I drink any more of this mange medicine I won't be able to hit the barnside of a broad."

"Broadside of a barn," Marc corrected her weakly. "But you're right. We'd better make the pitch while we're still conscious."

Toffee nodded and made a great show of registering happy inspiration. "Say," she cried, "you know

who would just love this whiskey?"

"No," Marc replied like the second part in a minstrel skit. "Who?"

"George!" Toffee said. "You remember good old George?"

Marc nodded vigorously. "Wouldn't he be just crazy about whiskey like this?"

"He certainly would. Crazy mad, he'd be. Isn't it too bad he's not here?" Then Toffee brightened. "But perhaps he is! You never can tell about good old George."

"But when we were talking to him earlier he didn't answer."

"Perhaps he misunderstood something one of us said," Toffee suggested. "Maybe he didn't understand our type of humor and got offended. You know, like when I said I was going to gouge his eyes out? A harmless remark to most people, but perhaps not so to good old George."

"True," Marc said sagely. "George always was sensitive," He glanced around the room. "George?" he called. "If you're here, old man, how about having a drink with us? If we said anything to hurt your feelings we certainly didn't mean to."

He paused to listen. There was a hesitant shuffling across the room.

"Well . . ." a voice said uneasily.

Marc and Toffee exchanged glances of triumph.

"You mustn't miss out on this, old man," Marc cajoled. "You really mustn't."

"And it will make such a nice friendly gesture," Toffee put in, "to show that you forgive us our

thoughtless little jibes."

"Well," the voice returned, a shade less hesitant. "I am a little dry."

"Of course you are," Marc said jovially, "and we have the very thing to bring you comfort and contentment. Just step over here and I'll give you this whole bottle."

"No tricks?" George asked warily.

"George!" Toffee said, thoroughly scandalized, "how can you even entertain such a notion?"

"Just to show you," Marc said, "why don't you stay invisible? You're perfectly safe that way."

"Okay," George agreed. "Just hold out the bottle."

"Right-oh," Marc said and turned to Toffee. "Give it everything," he whispered. Toffee nodded.

AS Marc held out the bottle, Toffee sighted on the area in line with his hand, on the principle that George, being a duplicate of Marc, his head would be on the same level. The best strategy, she felt, was to concentrate on this area as swiftly and violently as possible. She held the bottle in readiness and when, a moment later, the bottle jogged in Marc's hand, she was prepared. She swung as hard as she could in a wide horizontal swipe. About half way, the bottle jarred to an abrupt stop and shattered, spewing liquid and glass in all directions. This was subsequently followed by a surprised moan and a heavy thudding sound in the vicin-

ity of the floor.

"Got him!" Toffee cried jubilantly. "Smashed him right on the button!" She dropped the jagged neck of the bottle daintily to the floor.

"He's still invisible," Marc said worriedly. "I hope there'll be developments."

Developments came almost immediately, and they were well worth watching, though hardly the sight for sore eyes. Marc's calculations had been correct. Surprised, as it were, into unconsciousness, George had completely lost control of his ectoplasm. The trouble, though, was that instead of splashing out through his body all of a piece, it trickled out in fits and starts.

What appeared on the floor, under Marc's and Toffee's watchful eyes, was not George in total, but a sort of jig-saw George in which many of the vital pieces had been omitted. While one could be grateful for George's head, there was bound to be a pang of regret for the neck which had failed to appear.

An arm lay to the left, with only a finger or two to indicate that it had once blossomed a hand. Had there ever been an expression to the effect that half a torso was better than none, George had disproved it beyond measure; a torso, apparently severed from the collar bone to the midriff was so much worse than no torso at all as to be positively hair-raising. A random foot here, an errant knee cap there only garnished

the over-all picture of hideous human butchery. With a shudder of revulsion, Toffee turned from the awful sight.

"Leave it to George," she said, "just leave it to that monster to be as revolting as possible."

"I don't suppose it's really his fault," Marc said fairly, "but I wish he were invisible again."

It was at this moment that the congressman and his henchman, having completed their discussion in the front of the warehouse, arrived at the door of the storeroom and fitted a key to the lock.

"Duck!" Toffee said. "Get behind those crates!"

"What about you?"

"I'm going to get my invention back. Besides they can't hurt me, and the important thing is to give you a chance to escape."

"Okay," Marc nodded and faded into the dimness behind the crates.

TOFFEE moved to the nearest stack of boxes, boosted herself atop them and leaned back in an attitude of relaxed languor. She watched from the corner of her eye as the door swung open and the congressman and the thug advanced into the room. She lifted her gaze dreamily to the ceiling and began to hum quietly to herself.

"There she is, boss," the thug said. "There's the dame, up there."

"My word!" Congressman Ent-

werp said. "Where did Pillsworth ever pick her up?"

"In a Turkish bath, I guess, before they passed out the towels."

Toffee turned slowly and observed the two with heavy disdain.

"Please be quiet," she drawled, "you're disturbing my meditations."

"Where's Pillsworth?" the thug asked.

Toffee shrugged. "Somewhere around, I suppose."

"Okay, sister," the thug growled, "cut out the jazz. Where is he?"

"You're sure you want to know?"

"We insist," Congressman Entwerp said.

"Then just step nearer," Toffee said with an airy wave, "and feast your eyes. You will find Mr. Pillsworth—more or less—on the floor, just to the right of these boxes. I'm sure you'll excuse him if he doesn't rise to greet you."

Warily, the two men edged closer. Then suddenly the thug, catching sight of George in his disconnected condition, stopped short. His mouth worked soundlessly, and his eyes rolled loosely in their sockets. The congressman, not yet aware of George, looked at him.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked shortly. "Why are you standing there making faces? Stop that and . . . !"

The tirade ended abruptly as the congressman's gaze fell to George. He lost his breath in a thin wheeze.

For a long moment the two men simply goggled, then slowly they

turned away.

"You fool!" the congressman screamed. "I only told you to finish him off, not to hack him up into cutlets!"

"But I didn't!" the thug said shakely. "He was all right when I locked him in here."

"Then, who . . . ?"

Together, the two of them turned and regarded Toffee with incredulous eyes. Toffee returned their stares with innocent directness.

"Yes, gentlemen?" she murmured.

"Did you . . . ?" the congressman began, then broke off with a shudder.

"Did I what?" Toffee asked demurely.

"What the congressman means," the thug said in a whisper, "is did you . . . do *that*?"

"Oh, that," Toffee said. She returned her gaze thoughtfully to the ceiling as though trying to remember. Finally she shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm certain that's not one of my jobs. Too messy."

The men gaped.

"Holy smoke!" the thug quavered. "What happened to him?"

"Who knows?" Toffee shrugged. "Maybe he has some horrible disease. I figure it's his business."

"Good God!" the congressman breathed. "We've got to get him off our hands. We'll have to be careful, though. The hospital has the entire police force out looking for him. It's on the radio. If we were caught with him in that condition

the party wouldn't like it."

"Nobody would like it," the thug said. "Shall we dump him in the river?"

THE congressman shook his head. "Too many patrolmen around. There must be . . ." His voice trailed off into thoughtful silence. Finally he nodded with decision. "We won't try to hide him. We'll deliver him to the police just as he is—in an automobile crash. The girl too."

"Huh?" the thug said. "How do you mean?"

"It's simple enough. Pillsworth looks like a crash victim, so why don't we just let him be one? Go get a sack or something to carry him out in." He turned and moved toward the door. "I'll have Hank fix up one of the cars."

"Good night, boss," the thug said plaintively, following after him, "you mean I've got to pick him up—with my hands!"

The moment they were gone, locking the door after them, Toffee jumped down from her perch and Marc appeared from the shadows.

"Do you know who that was?" Marc asked excitedly.

"The old bird with the sable hair-do?"

Marc nodded. "It's Congressman Entwerp. I should have known he was behind this mess. And that isn't all; those crates of cheap whiskey are just a front. Underneath there's enough bacteria cul-

ture to wipe out the whole country. These boys are planning mass murder!"

"Also individual murder," Toffee said.

"What?"

"They're going to arrange an auto crash. When the wreckage is sorted out George and I will be prominent amongst the demolished extras."

"Good grief!"

"It's nothing to worry about," Toffee said. "After all, they can't possibly kill me—or George either, for that matter. In the meantime you can contact the police and see that they're arrested. There's just one thing though; you're going to have to get the police without letting the police get you."

"Huh?"

"It seems the entire force is out scouring the city for you, and I get the impression that they're supposed to rush you along to the operating room without messing around with any conversation."

"Golly," Marc said. "How am I going to work it? Even if I get a chance to tell them about Entwerp, they'll just think I'm delirious."

"Be your own bait," Toffee suggested. "Entwerp will be busy murdering George and me. All you have to do is get the cops to chase you to the scene of the crime so they can catch him red-handed. I'll see to it that the door's left unlocked long enough for you to get out of here . . ." She stopped as the

key sounded again in the lock. "Anyway, work it out as you go along, and I'll see you later . . ."

"WHAT took so long?" the congressman demanded. He was standing by the green sedan, holding the door open.

"It was the dame," the thug said breathlessly. "When I turned to lock up the storeroom, she let out a yip and took off. I had to chase her all over the joint before I caught her."

At his side, Toffee shook her head to get the hair out of her eyes. "I just wanted a little exercise to get up the circulation," she said.

"We certainly circulated," the thug agreed sourly. "All over the place."

"You didn't leave the storeroom open?" the congressman asked.

"I went back and locked it."

"I see you got Pillsworth in the car."

"Yeah," the thug said. "But he handled awful funny, like he was all strung together with invisible wire. I had a job spreadin' him out in the seat."

The congressman looked at him sharply. "You've probably been drinking that dummy whiskey again," he said. "Anyway, let's get going. The girl will have to drive."

"I don't know how to drive," Toffee said. "Besides, I haven't got a license."

"Never mind, sister," the thug said, "that's even better." He nudg-

ed her toward the door of the car, as the congressman moved off into the night. Toffee gazed inward at the dismembered George sprawled across the seat.

"Do I have to get in there with him?" she asked.

"The boss doesn't want you to be lonesome," the thug said.

"I'd rather be lonesome," Toffee said, but she got into the car anyway.

The thug closed the door after her and leaned through the window.

"Just so you'll know," he said, "I'd better explain. This car hasn't any brakes, and the steering is fixed. It's okay now, but after a few minutes it will break and the car will be out of control. We have it timed out with the curve at the end of the speedway, the one called Dead Man's Curve. By the time you reach that the wheel will be just about as much good to you as a set of knitting needles. In other words, you're going to drive due south with your foot to the floor and crack up on the curve. No one's missed that curve yet and lived."

"There's always a first time," Toffee said brightly.

"Don't count on it, sugar. And just to make sure you do what you're told, the congressman and me will be alongside in the congressman's car. I personally will be holding a rod aimed at your head, so don't get notions. Also, we want to be around to report the accident."

Toffee nodded approvingly. "It only seems the sort of thing any good citizen would do," she said.

The gunman stared at her. "Too bad a good looking dame like you has to be so wacky."

"We all have our little flaws," Toffee said chattily. "That's life."

"Aren't you even worried?"

Toffee shook her head. "I've always wanted to learn to drive," she said, smiling.

"Oh, my God!" the thug moaned. "Maybe it's best; you're sure to kill yourself sooner or later anyway."

"Of course," Toffee said, patting his hand. "I don't want you to blame yourself. Just consider you're doing a public service."

MEANWHILE, a lanky figure had emerged warily from the warehouse and was lurking in a twitchy sort of way, in the dimness of the alley. Obscured in shadow, Marc had watched Toffee get into the green sedan, the thug instructing her in the art of driving. He glanced anxiously down the street, praying for a police car.

A small coupe, with a man and woman inside, pulled up to the curb at the end of the block, and the man got out and disappeared into the telegraph office on the corner. But that was all.

Marc jumped as he heard the green sedan start up. He turned to see a black limousine, driven by the congressman, pull up beside it.

The thug crossed and got inside and a moment later the barrel of a gun caught light from the window. Time was seeping out.

Ducking from cover, Marc raced for the coupe and the waiting woman on the corner. Reaching it, he threw the door open and jumped inside. The woman, a faded blond, pressed back against the seat with a startled cry. Marc, however, was too relieved at finding the key in the ignition to notice.

He started the car, threw it into gear and set it in motion almost in a single action. The woman's reaction to this was a shrill, braying scream.

"Please," Marc said distractedly. "Don't." The woman screamed again. "Do you have to do that?" he asked annoyedly.

"I have to do something. don't I?" the woman enquired wretchedly. "I can't just sit here, can I?"

"I don't see why not," Marc said, peering down the street intently. "It doesn't help anything to scream like that."

"It helps me plenty," the woman retorted hotly. "When naked men come leaping into a lady's car and driving her off to God knows what, it gives her a great satisfaction to scream." As though to prove her point she paused to scream again. "Anyway, it makes her feel a hell of a lot better."

"I don't see why," Marc said with rising irritation.

"Well, put yourself in my place,"

the woman snapped. "What would you do if a naked man came leaping into your car?"

"Naked men don't leap into my car." Marc said self-righteously. "I wouldn't let them."

"Are you suggesting that I invite naked men to come leaping into my car?" the woman asked frigidly. "I'll have you know. . ."

"The way you carry on about it," Marc said, "one just automatically draws his own conclusions. One pictures a whole procession of naked men just waiting their turn to leap into your car, you're such an authority on these occasions."

FOR a moment the blond fell into a sulky silence. She glanced out the window at the rapidly passing scenery.

"What I want to know," she said at length, "is what is my husband going to say."

"Not knowing your husband," Marc said, "I'm in no position to guess. If I were you I'd judge by the way he's expressed himself on other similar occasions."

"There you go again," the woman said, "insulting me. Where are you taking me?"

"I'm not taking you anywhere," Marc said. "I'm taking myself. You just happened to be here."

"Oh," the woman said, not, it seemed, without a touch of disappointment. There was another lapse of silence.

"Do you know where there's a

cop?" Marc asked, after a few more blocks.

"If I did," the woman said, "I'd be with him instead of you. What do you want with a cop?"

"I've got to find one," Marc said anxiously. "It means everything."

By this time the woman had resigned herself to the unhappy fact that she was out for a spin with a raving lunatic. She nodded sagely, as though agreeing with this last remark entirely.

"Sure," she said, "sometimes I feel that way myself. Cops are everything. It just sweeps over me all of a heap."

"What sweeps over you?" Marc asked absently.

"Cops," the woman said.

"Do you think you ought to be making these little confessions to a total stranger?" Marc asked distastefully. "Or do you mean your husband is a cop?"

"Of course not," the woman said. "My husband is a butcher. What's that got to do with it? I was just saying that sometimes cops just seem to surge over me." She giggled with nervous desperation. "A sort of blue serge, you might say."

"Well," Marc said, "since you seem to know all these cops so well, you ought to be able to tell me where they hang out."

"I don't know all these cops," the woman said.

"You mean they're a bunch of total strangers?" Marc asked, thoroughly shocked. "My word!"

"Couldn't we just drop the subject?" the woman asked defeatedly. "I'm all confused somehow."

"I should think you would be confused," Marc agreed. His voice trailed away on a rising inflection as he spotted a police car parked at the curb across the street. "Cops!" he breathed. He glanced ahead. "You see that green sedan up ahead with the black limousine beside it?"

The woman nodded vaguely. "The one that just cut up over the sidewalk? What about it?"

"Keep your eye on it," Marc instructed, "while I get the cop's attention. It's a matter of life and death."

THE green sedan, as it turned out, was eminently worth keeping an eye on. Toffee, beleaguered as she was with the mechanics of keeping the vehicle in motion, had come upon other problems. Early in the game, feeling vague stirrings at her side, she had looked around to see George's dismembered head yawn thickly and open its eyes. Then, as if this wasn't loathsome enough, a set of fingers wriggled to the edge of the seat, gripped it and boosted the halved torso around so that the disjointed feet dropped to the floor. George, rising from unconsciousness had hauled himself into a sitting position. Toffee looked on this development without favor.

"Stay down, George," she hissed. "Get back where you were."

The head swiveled around hid-

eously, a wounded look in its eyes.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said sadly. "You hit me."

"And I'll hit you again," Toffee promised, "if you don't get down."

George merely looked baffled at this. "Where are we goin?" he asked.

"To an accident," Toffee said.

George's face brightened. "Was Marc in it?" he asked.

"It hasn't happened yet," Toffee explained. "We're going to be in it, you and I. In fact, we're the whole accident."

"Huh?" George said, edging up a bit. "Us?"

"That's right," Toffee nodded. "They figure we know too much."

"Too much about what?"

"About this subversive business," Toffee said. "They think we know their plan to overthrow the government."

"So they're going to kill us in an accident?"

"Uh-huh."

"Aren't you scared?"

Toffee shrugged. "Why should I be? I'm a product of Marc's mind. I can't possibly be destroyed unless he is. And he's perfectly safe."

"He is?" George said, his voice heavy with disappointment. "Why don't these people want to kill him?"

"They think they are killing him," Toffee said. "They think you're Marc. In fact they believe you're already dead."

"What!" George cried. "You mean I'm acting as a decoy to save Marc's life?"

Toffee nodded smugly. "Some onions, eh, George?"

"Stop the car!" George shouted. "Let me out!"

"No brakes," Toffee said. She nodded toward the limousine. "Besides, they won't let me. You'd better get down in the seat or they'll think it's funny."

"I hope they do," George said sullenly. "I hope they think it's funny as hell and do something about it. It's so damned unfair." And with that he leaned across Toffee, juttied his head out the window and began baying in the direction of the limousine.

"Stop that!" Toffee said. "It sounds awful."

GEORGE swiveled his frightful head around in her direction. "It should," he said. "It's the *Torment Lament*. I learned it in the Moaning Chorus and it's guaranteed to drive you mad in nothing flat." He turned back to the night and the limousine and sent his voice wailing into the wind.

It was an effort that was not lost on its audience. The occupants of the limousine looked around sharply with horrified eyes.

"Jesus in Heaven!" the thug gasped.

At his side the congressman was so taken with the fearsome recital that he completely forgot he was

driving. As the car careened dangerously, the thug reached out and pulled the wheel.

"Isn't it awful, boss?" he breathed.

"Awful doesn't begin to tell it," the congressman choked. "It's— it's *awful!*"

"Yeah. That's what I mean to say."

"How can anything sound like that?" the congressman asked hauntedly.

"If it can look like that," the thug said, "I guess it shouldn't have no trouble soundin' like that."

"And look at that girl, will you? She's actually talking to the filthy thing."

"She looks plenty hot under the collar."

"Why not? I'd be sore as hell myself."

"When do we get to the curve, boss?"

"I don't know," the congressman said. "But I can't wait. The sooner that car crashes and takes that frightful thing with it the better."

MEANWHILE, as the two cars skidded and reeled toward the appointed spot of disaster, Marc continued to loiter several blocks behind. Having deliberately cut across traffic in the middle of the block, he pulled up beside the police car and leaned out the window.

"I just cut across traffic!" he called out.

The cop behind the wheel left his

conversation with his companion and observed Marc dubiously.

"So what?" he asked. "You want me to give you a gold star on your driver's license?"

"I don't have a driver's license," Marc offered hopefully. "What are you going to do about it, you big, thick-headed slob?"

The cop turned back to his partner. "A kidder, we've got here," he said. He turned back to Marc. "Beat it, comedian, you and your girl friend take off."

"Aren't you going to chase me?" Marc asked. "I'm a lawbreaker."

"Move along, chum," the cop drawled, "before I sell you a ticket to the orphan's picnic."

"But you've *got* to chase me," Marc said urgently.

"No I don't, friend," the cop said. "I've got to sit here and listen for radio leads on this goofy Pillsworth guy."

"But that's me!" Marc said. "I'm Pillsworth!"

The cop looked at him with forced patience. "Sure, sure," he said. "And I'm Miss Atlantic City. Beat it." He turned back to his companion.

"What if I told you I knew where a murder was going to happen?" Marc ventured.

The cop looked around. "You're just full of news, aren't you?" he said, and turned away again.

For a moment Marc sat in silent indecision. Then he turned to the blond.

"Why don't you scream?" he asked.

"Why should I?" the woman asked interestedly. "Do you really know where a murder's going to happen?"

"You said screaming made you feel good," Marc suggested.

"I feel fine," the woman said. "I always do with a lot of stuff going on. Who's going to get murdered?"

Marc glanced desperately from the woman to the cops and back again. A determined look came into his eyes. He cautiously extended two fingers to the woman's thigh. "I'm sorry," he said, and pinched as hard as he could.

THE results were everything to be wished for—and more. Stiffening in her seat, the woman let out a bleat that surpassed even her previous efforts. Even George might have envied the torment in her voice as it soared, swooped, scaled the heights and dipped into soul-shattering depths. At its completion, the blond turned and took a clawing swipe at Marc's face.

Marc ducked. "That's the stuff!" he said happily, noting from the corner of his eye that he had finally gained the undivided attention of the police force. Pinching the blonde again and nodding his satisfaction at the second chorus, he threw the coupe into gear, cut across traffic and headed down the speedway. It was only a moment before the wail of a siren mingled with

the shrill vocalizations of his companion. He pushed the gas feed to the floor.

To the witnesses along the speedway, the pedestrians, the vendors, the shop owners and just plain malingerers, the events of the evening were never entirely clear. Some, judging simply by the volume of noise, settled for the notion that what had passed was nothing more than an overly exuberant wedding procession. The sticklers, however, rejected this notion flatly, pointing to the significant details of the affair.

Which, they demanded to know, was the wedding couple? Certainly it couldn't have been the redhead and the wailing man in the green sedan; certainly no bride—or at least very few—had ever used that kind of language to her groom on the wedding night. And it took the most wretched husband years to achieve the note of despair which this poor fellow was loosing on the evening air.

As for the black limousine, that was out. Though its occupants seemed locked together in some sort of mad embrace, the arrangement appeared to have its roots in terror rather than affection.

The couple in the coupe that followed was even more difficult to wedge into the picture of the young couple united. After all, wasn't she screaming her lungs out and hammering on his head with both fists?

As for the police who followed—and they probably knew the truth of the matter—they looked shocked to the core. So there simply wasn't any answer for it until the morning papers came out.

The participants in the demented chase along the speedway, however, were far too engrossed in their own problems to care for the conflict they introduced into the lives of innocent bystanders. Toffee, for one, could not have been less concerned; she was too mad at George.

"Stop that caterwauling!" she yelled. "Stop it, you idiot."

GEORGE pulled his disconnected head inside the window and eyed Toffee owlishly. His other parts adjusted themselves and the head sank into Toffee's lap. There, gazing up at her, it lazily crossed its eyes and began to whimper pitifully.

"Ugh!" Toffee cried. "I'll go mad!"

The head relaxed its face obligingly into an expression of feeble-minded delight, letting its tongue loll loosely from the corner of its mouth.

"That's all!" Toffee screamed. "I'm getting out of here!"

Without further consideration for the occupants of the limousine and the approaching curve, she relinquished the wheel, threw the car door open, and with one last agonized glance at the loathsome head, which was now foaming prettily at

the mouth, prepared to depart its company. In the limousine this bit of action was not unobserved.

"She's trying to get away!" the congressman yelled. "Stop her!"

The thug turned to the window and looked. "Get back!" he hollered. "Get back or I'll blast you!"

"Go ahead," Toffee cried. "It'll be a positive pleasure next to what I've just been through."

"Okay!" the thug said grimly. "You asked for it!"

His finger closed down on the trigger. It was just at that moment, however, that the green sedan, no longer benefitted by a driver, swerved toward the limousine, throwing Toffee back inside. The congressman cramped the wheel of the limousine sharply to avoid a crash. The gunman, thrown sharply against the door, fired wildly into the night. From the rear there was the sound of screeching tires and forced brakes.

"Good night!" the congressman panted, righting the limousine as the green sedan veered away again. "What did you hit?"

"I think it was that coupe back there," the thug said, peering out the window. "I must have hit a tire; it's out of control."

"Good Lord!" the congressman yelled, "the curve's right ahead! We're pinned in between them. We're going to crash. Everybody's going to crash!"

No sooner was this dire predic-

tion out of the congressman's mouth than it became a deafening reality. Ahead, the green sedan raced headlong into the concrete embankment with a rending smash and almost literally flattened itself into two dimensions.

This was the signal for the two lesser crashes that followed. The limousine engaged its radiator forcibly into the wreckage just in time to receive a skidding broadside from the coupe.

A MOMENT of silence followed, emphasized by the approaching scream of a siren. The police car jolted to a stop and the two cops ran forward to the scene of destruction. They reached the coupe first. "Here!" the first cop said. "What's going on?"

The faded blonde juttet her head out of the window. "He blew out my tire!" she rasped. "Not to mention all that pinching!"

"Pinching?" the cop asked curiously. "What kind of pinching, lady? Where?"

"All kinds of pinching," the woman said evilly. "Everywhere."

The cop peered at Marc. "Why's he dressed in that nightshirt?"

"How should I know?" the woman said. "Maybe he thinks he's cute or something."

The cop leaned closer. "Here, you," he said, "why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm tired," Marc said exhaustedly, "and I want to go to bed. I

had a little drink about an hour ago . . ."

"Stop that now," the cop barked. "No nonsense."

"But it's all perfectly true," Marc said.

The cop started to speak further, but he caught sight of the congressman and his companion climbing out of the limousine and tore himself away.

"There are people dying in that car!" the congressman shouted tragically, hurrying forward. "It's awful, officer!"

"All maimed and cut up," the thug put in. "Loose heads and legs and stuff all over the place."

"Have you seen them?" the policeman asked.

"Well, they must be," the congressman put in quickly. "How could it be otherwise? The man in the car is Marc Pillsworth. I saw him just before the crash."

The policeman did a take. "Yeah?"

"Sure," the thug said excitedly. "Only now he's all cut up—loose head and arms and . . .!"

"Shut up," the congressman snapped.

"They might still be alive," the cop said. "We've got to do something about it."

"Indeed we do," the congressman said. "Perhaps we can assist them."

"Come on," the cop said. "You can give a hand."

DUTIFULLY the three turned to the sedan. They turned and then stopped with a harmonized gasp, the cop taking the bass. In the moment of their turning there had been a sudden movement in the car and the door had swung partially open. In the opening there appeared a leg of provocative shapeliness.

"A leg!" the thug shuddered. "I told you!"

"A dame's leg," the cop breathed. "And just think what the rest of her must have been like with a leg like that! Just imagine . . . !" He sucked in his breath as the leg began to show unexpected signs of life. It quivered, turned and was quickly joined by a mate of equal perfection. It was only a moment before Toffee appeared in total, quite unmarked. Her mood, however, was hostile. Quitting the ruined car she turned back to the door and thrust her head inside.

"Of all the beastly, rotten, evil-minded, stinking things to do to a girl!" she snapped. "Come out of there you slimy-souled son of Satan and fight like a man. I'll teach you to make foul passes at a girl when she is stuck under a clutch. I'll show you . . . !"

"Good gosh!" the cop said. "Who's she talking to?"

"She must be hysterical," the congressman said, thoroughly shaken. "Probably got a crack on the head and isn't accountable for what she's saying."

"That's certainly no way to talk to the dead," the cop said.

"It's no way to talk to the living," the thug said. "If she hauled off at me like that I'd rather be dead."

"The poor child's obviously insane," the congressman said firmly. "There's no question about it."

Meanwhile Toffee was still at it. "Come out of there, you hulking lout," she grated, "before I come in there and drag you out by your ears!"

"Poor little thing," the cop said sadly. "She really believes Mr. Pillsworth can come out of that car. She refuses to believe he's dead."

By now Toffee had stepped forward and yanked the door all the way open. As the three in the background stared in varying degrees of apprehension, a thin figure in a brief linen gown crawled out on its hand and knees. The congressman swayed slightly as though about to faint.

"You look more natural down on all fours, you beast," Toffee rasped. "I ought to kick you right in the slats. Get up and try to face me if you've the nerve!"

APPARENTLY the shock of the accident had given George's ectoplasm a further jolt for now he was completely materialized. He looked up at Toffee ruefully and got to his feet.

"I was only trying to get you loose," he said.

"The way you were pawing me was enough to get any girl loose," Toffee said. "Just don't try it again."

"Gawd a'mighty!" the thug whispered. "Pillsworth!"

"Pillsworth?" the cop said. "But that's the same guy who was pinching the other dame in the coupe. My gosh! how he gets around!"

Just then the other policeman, who had retreated to the back-ground, arrived on the scene with Marc and the blond in custody.

"Hey," he said, "I caught this creep on the creep. He was trying to sneak out."

The cop looked quickly at Marc, then back to George. "It's the same guy!" he said. "Which one of you birds is Pillsworth?"

Marc and George went smoothly into their routine of pointing to each other in unison.

"He is!" they said.

The cop turned to Toffee. "Do you know which is which?" he asked.

"Sure," Toffee said and nodded at George. "He's Pillsworth."

"She's crazy," George retorted hotly. "She's as crazy as bedbugs in a bathtub."

"That's right," the thug put in. "She's a looney if there ever was one."

Marc moved urgently to gain the cop's attention. "You've got to arrest that man," he said, pointing at the congressman. "He's a subversive and a murderer."

THE congressman whirled about. "You must be insane, sir!" he rasped in frantic denial.

"*You* must be," Marc said. "You must have been ripe for the hatch years ago."

"You're a fine one to talk," the blonde put in nastily. "Officer this man is off his rocker like a busted hobby horse. He's done nothing but pinch me ever since we met."

Toffee levelled her gaze at Marc. "What were you doing pinching that tomato?" she demanded. "Just what were you getting at?"

"Oh, don't be crazy," Marc said distractedly.

"Oh, so I'm crazy, am I?" Toffee said, doubling her fists.

"You sure are, sister," the thug put in. "You're the most hopped up dame I ever saw." He turned to the cop. "She ought to be locked up."

"Oh, yeah?" Toffee said. "At least I didn't put anyone in a busted car and send them off to get killed. Officer, I want you to arrest that killer."

"Look, officer," Marc insisted, "you've got to take this man into custody. He's a menace to the whole country."

"If you take anyone in, officer," the blond put in harshly, "make it this skinny bimbo. Pinch him like he pinched me."

The congressman moved in aggressively toward Marc. "You're making slanderous accusations!" he

blustered. "You should be committed to an institution!"

"You're crazy!" Marc raged.

"*You're* crazy!" the blond screeched.

"*You're* crazy!" Toffee hollered at the blond.

"*You're* crazy!" the thug insisted moodily.

The cop turned dizzily to his companion and held out a palsied hand. "Hurry!" he pleaded, "call the wagon, and let's take the whole bunch of them in. In another minute *I'm* going to be crazy!"

THE morning sun poured through the high windows of the courtroom, wasting its brightness on a scene of sullen dementia. Judge Carper's heavy face had achieved a shade of dyspeptic vermillion in record time this morning. Even the flies clung to the walls in muted terror as his gavel banged on the substantial wood of the bench and set the room atremble.

"Silence!" the judge roared. "Silence, damnit! And if one more defendant makes just one more crack about the sanity of any other defendant I'll lock the whole crew of you up and melt the key down for a watch fob." He ran his shaking hand over his forehead. "Besides, so far I don't even know which ones of you are the defendants and which are the complainants." He turned to the policeman. "Do you know?"

"I'm not sure, the cop admitted

uneasily. "I think they're all both."

"Both what?" the judge asked confusedly.

"Both defendants and complainants. As far as I can tell everybody's mad as hell at everybody else. It sort of goes around in a circle."

"And I'm burned up at the lot of them," the judge said inalignantly. "Who are those two over there without any clothes on?"

"I think they lost their clothes in the crash," the cop said vaguely. "The guy is really two guys, so it's hard to tell."

"What?"

"There are really two guys like that," the cop said. "Dressed alike."

The judge peered across at Marc with deep speculation. "I only see one of him," he said dryly.

"The other one disappeared," the cop said, casting down his eyes. "He—well, sort of evaporated."

"Evaporated? What are you talking about?"

"It's a fact, your honor. It happened on the way in. The only way I can explain it is that one minute he was there and the next he just sort of melted away."

"Rooney," the judge said, "have you lost your wits?"

"It wouldn't surprise me, judge," the cop sighed. "Everyone else has. Why not me?"

"There's only one man there, Rooney," the judge said harshly. "And judging by those skinny legs of his, maybe not even that."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you bucking for another vacation, Rooney, is that it?"

"Well, your honor, I do feel tired. It seemed to come over me all of a sudden, after I ran into all those people."

"All right, we'll see what can be done. In the meantime let's have no more of this falderol about one man being two, only one of them evaporated."

"YES, your honor," Rooney said, greatly saddened. "There's only one man. I guess I was mistaken."

"Or drunk," the judge murmured sourly and turned his gaze to the assortment before him. "Now what happened with this gang?"

"They were all in a wreck that involved three cars. The young lady in the underskirt was driving the first one. She claims that the dark man with the scar tried to murder her by forcing her to drive a car with a broken steering gear."

"What does he say?"

"He says the young lady is mentally unstable and of low character. It seems that he and the congressman observed her in the car for some time before the crash. They say that her behavior was most erratic, that she wailed and shrieked and at one point tried to abandon the car in full motion."

"How else can you abandon a car?" the judge said sharply. "You have to be in full motion."

"I mean the car was in full motion."

"I see. Where was this gentleman and the congressman while they were doing all this observing?"

"They were in the second car. The congressman was driving. The dark man is his body-guard. He was cleaning his gun at the time and that's how he happened to shoot the third car, although the young lady insists he was trying to shoot her."

"I think I've lost the thread," the judge said foggily. "Who was in the third car?"

"The man with the skinny legs who says he isn't Pillsworth, and a blond woman."

"He says he isn't Pillsworth and a blond woman?" the judge asked, his eyes loosening in their sockets. "Why should he say a thing like that?"

"No, no," the cop said earnestly, "he just says he isn't Pillsworth."

"Then he admits to being a blond woman?" the judge gasped. "He must be mad!"

"No," the cop said, "he doesn't admit anything about being a blond woman."

"Then he denies being a blond woman," the judge said with relief. "I wish you'd give me this story straight. Who accused him of being a blond woman in the first place?"

"No one," the cop said, almost tearfully. "He was only accused of being Pillsworth."

"Pillsworth? You mean the fellow the hospital's looking for? Who said he was Pillsworth?"

A look of doom came into the cop's eyes. "The—the other one, your honor," he said.

"The other what?" the judge glowered. "Stop being evasive and answer my questions."

ROONEY swallowed fatefully. "The other Pillsworth," he answered. "He accused Pillsworth of being Pillsworth—that is unless he's Pillsworth himself. Only he melted away so I guess we'll never really know. The blond woman insists she can't identify him."

There was a dreadful silence as the judge tapped the palm of his hand with the gavel. He lifted his gaze to the ceiling then levelled it slowly on Rooney.

"So we're back to the blond woman again, are we?"

"I'm afraid so," Rooney admitted weakly. "That's her over there, looking mad."

"I had hoped we were through with the blond woman," the judge said acidly. "I thought we'd washed the blond woman up."

"No, your honor, I'm afraid not."

"This isn't the same blond woman that Pillsworth denies being, is it?"

"No, sir."

"Does she deny that she's Pillsworth, is that it?"

"No, sir," Rooney sighed hopelessly. "She's just a blond woman.

She refuses to give her name because her husband's a butcher."

"Is she a defendant or a complainant?"

"A complainant," the cop said. "She said that Pillsworth stole her car and pinched her. That is if he's Pillsworth, and he denies it."

"Don't you mean he pinched her car?"

"No, sir. He stole her car, but he pinched her—on the thigh."

"My word!" the judge said.

The cop nodded. "She wants to sue someone, only since there were two of them she doesn't know which one did the pinching. She can't be sure whether it was this Pillsworth or the other one—if you follow my meaning."

The judge paled. "Are you being deliberately cryptic, Rooney, or is it simply that you can't see your way clear to be clear, if I make myself clear."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, your honor."

"Just a taste of your own medicine, Rooney," the judge said vengefully. "How do you like it?" He turned his gaze moodily on the blond. "About this blond . . . ?"

"Yes, your honor?"

"She gets everything all snarled up. Everytime she enters the picture it ceases to make sense. Do you suppose this would all clear up if I just had her thrown out of court?"

"I don't think so. With or without her, things are snarled up just

the same. I've never seen so much snarling in all my life; these people just don't seem to like each other."

"What about this fellow who denies he's Pillsworth?" the judge asked. "Is he the only pure defendant in the bunch?"

"Oh, no, your honor. He's the biggest complainant of the lot. And he's far from pure. He's accusing the congressman of being the head of a gang of subversives who are planning to kill the entire population with bacteria."

THE judge leaned across the bench, plainly scandalized. "The congressman!" he gasped. "Why Congressman Entworp was a classmate of mine!"

"Yes, your honor. And he's threatened suit against this fellow for slander."

"Good," the judge said. "Have this Pillsworth or whoever he is brought before the bench. Obviously, he's a low criminal type. It sticks out all over him."

The cop nodded and turned in Marc's direction. "You," he said. "The judge will hear you."

Across the room, however, Marc gave no sign of hearing. Instead, he was gazing intently at the vacant chair next to his own. On his face was an expression of anxious annoyance.

"Now, look, George," he said, "You owe it to humanity to show yourself and help get this mess

cleared up. Why not be a good loser for a change?"

The empty chair shifted, just perceptibly, with an air of complacency.

"Maybe they'll hang you," George replied hopefully from thin air.

"Don't be silly," Marc said. "There's no reason why they should. Come on, now, be a good fellow and help get this over with."

"Oh, I'm going to help get it over with," George said pleasantly. "When I'm through, they'll lower the boom on you so hard you'll be the first man in history to be buried in an envelope."

Just then Toffee leaned forward and touched Marc's arm. "The judge wants to speak to you," she said. "Come on, let's go."

Marc glanced around. "Did he call you too?"

"Well, no," Toffee admitted, "but I'm an interested party. I want to see that you get fair treatment."

"Couldn't you just stay out of it?" Marc pleaded. "Couldn't I just handle this myself?"

"Nonsense," Toffee said. "You need me. Come on, the old gaffer's beginning to look apoplectic again."

"Oh, all right," Marc sighed. Getting up he followed Toffee to a position before the bench. The judge glowered down at them critically.

"So glad you finally found you could come," he said.

"Thank you," Toffee beamed. "It's nice of you to have us."

The gavel barked irritably. There was silence until the judge's eyebrows ceased to twitch.

"What are you doing here?" the judge enquired with forced composure. "Who called you forward?"

"Lots of people have called me forward," Toffee said, "but that's just talk, judge. I'm just impulsive."

"Silence!" the judge said. "Good God, girl, no one asked you for any sordid confessions. I just want to know what you're doing here?"

Toffee nodded toward Marc. "I'm with him," she said.

"Then he's the man who was with you in the green sedan?"

"Oh, no." Toffee shook her head. "He's the other one."

The judge blanched. "The other one?" he asked apprehensively.

Toffee nodded. "They're exactly alike. Only this one is nicer. That's why I switched."

The judge raised his gavel warningly, and turned to Marc. "Are you twins, sir?"

Marc opened his mouth to speak, but before he could George's voice sounded immediately behind him.

"Do I look like twins, you thick-headed joker?" the voice asked. "And if you must drink in the morning, for God's sake lay off the cheap stuff so you don't see double. I always heard justice was blind but I didn't know it was blind drunk."

THERE was an ominous silence in the court as the judge raked

Marc with a glance of pure loathing. "Are you deliberately in contempt of court?" he asked.

Again Marc started to speak and again the voice beat him to it. "In it?" it said. "I'm fairly swimming in high octane contempt."

The blond who had been watching these proceedings with growing agitation suddenly sprang from her chair. "That's him!" she yelled hysterically. "I'm positive!"

"Be quiet, you!" the judge barked. "I've had enough out of you!"

"But he pinched me!" the blond cried.

"You're lucky that's all he did," the judge snapped.

"But you don't know where!"

The judge eyed her distantly. "With that lumpy figure of yours," he said, "it could scarcely matter. Now, shut up." He turned back to Marc. "I understand you've been making libelous remarks against Congressman Entwep."

Marc looked around hopelessly, afraid to open his mouth lest George would take over again. He compressed his lips into a thin line.

"Speak up, man!"

Marc looked up unhappily. "I—I—" he murmured fearfully.

"What's the matter with you?" the judge asked. "Let's hear your accusations against my good friend the congressman."

"The congressman?" Marc ventured, then brightened as he noticed there was no interference from George. "Oh, yes. The congress-

man must be imprisoned at once, your honor. He's a national menace. He instigated a propaganda program to dope the public against the threat of the foreign powers. But worst of all, he has enough bacteria culture to murder the entire population."

"And what's more," Toffee broke in, "he pinched my gadget."

The judge's eyes swiveled about hauntedly. "He *what*?"

"Pinched my gadget," Toffee insisted. "The one with the button."

"Now just a minute," the judge said a little wildly. "Wasn't it the blond woman who had her gadget pinched?"

"Don't be silly," Toffee said. "She hasn't a gadget to be pinched."

"She hasn't?" the judge said in a startled whisper. "What happened to her gadget?"

"I guess she just didn't have one in the first place," Toffee said. "You can't just go out and buy them, you know."

THE judge turned to the cop. "Do you know anything about why this blond woman doesn't have a gadget?" he asked interestedly.

"Search me," the cop said. "I didn't know she didn't. Maybe it's because her husband's a butcher. Maybe . . ."

"Don't," the judge cried, shuddering. "Don't go on! I don't even want to think about it."

"Well, who cares about her gad-

get anyway?" Toffee asked bewilderedly. "It's *my* gadget I'm trying to tell you about."

"And I don't want to hear about it," the judge said shortly. "This court is no place for examination room discussions."

"Or much of anything else," Toffee retorted angrily. "Especially justice."

"Look, judge," Marc put in desperately. "You've got to listen to me. About all this bacteria. . ."

"Bacteria?" the judge said, startled. "What about bacteria?"

"It's a threat," Marc said. "It's got to be stopped."

The judge nodded. "My dentist said the same thing the other day. Are you a dentist?"

"Of course I'm not a dentist," Marc said. "It's the congressman."

"That's preposterous," the judge said. "The congressman isn't a dentist, never has been. You're just trying to rattle me."

Again, as Marc started to speak, the voice from behind took over. "That's rich, that is," it slurred. "You were rattled the day you were born, you old tosspot, and you've been getting balmier ever since. If you have the brain of a gnat . . ."

The gavel smashed down on the bench like the crack of doom.

"Go!" the judge said. "Go and leave me alone! You're all trying to drive me out of my mind."

"With a mind like yours," Toffee said, "it would be a fast drive

on a kiddy car."

"Go!" the judge screamed. "Go away!"

Defeated by sheer volume, Marc and Toffee retreated back to their chairs and sat down. The one next to Marc's scraped back a trifle of its own volition.

"You fiend!" Marc hissed at the empty chair. "That was a fine mess, wasn't it?"

"Glad you admire my work," George said complacently out of thin air. "Isn't it remarkable how exactly alike our voices sound?"

"Go to hell," Marc said sullenly.

"If I do I'll probably meet you there," George said. "The old boy has you marked down for a sanity test. I heard him say so as you left up there. Somehow, it warms me to think of you locked up with a bunch of homicidal maniacs. Who's to say what might happen to you?"

The gavel rapped on the bench again, this time more calmly.

"I'd like to speak to the congressman," the judge announced. "Not that I put any stock in the ridiculous accusations of that black-hearted nit-wit, but I would like to talk to someone rational for a change."

Across the room, the congressman rose from his chair with portly composure.

"I'm happy for the opportunity to defend myself against the ravings of this lunatic," he said smoothly, "though I'm certain the court

hasn't taken them the least bit seriously."

"Of course not, congressman," the judge said grandly. "This court is always fair and impartial. Step up and have a chair. I'm sorry I can't offer you a drink during session, but perhaps we could have lunch together somewhere?"

"Good grief!" Toffee whispered. "They're carrying on like old sweet-hearts."

THE congressman smiled pityingly at Marc. "Actually, I have the greatest compassion for our poor friend here," he said magnanimously. "Who knows what dreadful experience drove him out of his senses?"

"Why the old foghorn!" Marc hissed between clenched teeth. "He's got enough gall to float a fleet."

"As for his fantastic charges," the congressman continued, "they're almost too silly to refute." He beamed on the judge. "I think you know just about how subversive I am, your honor."

The judge smiled broadly. "Call me Ralph," he said.

"Okay, Ralph," the congressman smiled. "And about that bacteria business; the only bacteria culture I have is home in the refrigerator. I just happened to let some cheese go mouldy."

The judge laughed immoderately. "Oh, Congressman!" he gasped, wiping his eyes. "You always were a wit!"

Toffee frowned her disapproval.

"This is worse than television," she said.

"What am I going to do?" Marc said. "I can't let him get away with it. I'll wind up in an asylum while he sells the whole country down the river."

Toffee nodded morosely. "We've got to think of something," she said. "If they won't listen to sense, I guess the only thing to do is resort to madness."

"How do you mean?"

"Trade seats with me," Toffee said. "I want to talk to George."

"It won't do any good. He won't listen to sense any more than the rest of them."

"That's all right," Toffee said. "What I have in mind is more nonsense—and a little hypnotism."

"Hypnotism?"

"Uh-huh. I told you I've been studying. Come on, trade."

AS unobtrusively as possible they changed seats. Toffee settled herself, crossed her legs with care, and turned to the vacant seat at her side. When she spoke her voice was husky and confidential.

"Look, George," she said, "I've been thinking . . ."

The chair quivered interestedly. "Yes?" George's voice said out of emptiness. "What about?"

"You and me," Toffee said. "I've just been going over things in my mind, and you know, George, I've really been sort of foolish."

"How do you mean?"

"Well take the way I always favor Marc against you. Suddenly it just occurred to me that there's no logical reason for it. After all you're just alike—except for a few little differences, of course."

"Oh?" George said, a note of interest creeping into his voice. "What differences?"

"Well, for instance, you're more aggressive, George. You have a more active, dynamic personality. You're the sort who knows what he wants and goes out after it."

"I suppose you could say that," George admitted. "What else?"

"You're cleverer, too. Look at the way you've got Marc bottled up right now, for example. He's a dead duck. In fact, to tell you the truth, George, you make Marc look pretty sick. I'm beginning to think a girl would be much better off with you."

George cleared his throat. "You're sure you mean it?" he asked.

"Of course I do," Toffee said. "Why wouldn't I, George? It's not just that you're cleverer and more dominant than Marc, there are other little things too, things only a woman would notice. Your eyes, for instance."

"My eyes?"

Toffee nodded. "Uh-huh. Your eyes are ever so much more exciting than Marc's. I don't know what it is, but there's a subtle difference. I guess it's personality. I've always noticed it."

"Oh, my eyes aren't all that

good," George demurred. "Pleasant and friendly, perhaps, but . . ."

"Oh, much more than that," Toffee insisted. "Flashing and roguish."

"You really think so?"

"Certainly. That and more."

Toffee paused for a moment, appeared hesitant. "George . . . ?"

"Yes, Toffee?"

"Would you show me your eyes? Just materialize them for a moment so I can gaze into them?"

"Do you really like them that much?"

"Please, George . . ."

"Well . . . all right."

AND so it was that the congressman, long distracted by a view of Toffee fawning on a vacant chair, suddenly found himself staring across the room at two disembodied eyes which lolled in mid-air, swiveling and rolling about in a delirious attempt to be flashing and roguish. He coughed in a strangled way and glanced around at the judge.

The judge, had the congressman been astute enough to notice, had suddenly gone white about the gills and showed a shifty disinclination to meet his gaze. The truth of the matter was that the judge, similarly baffled by Toffee's seductive attitude toward the chair, had also been subjected to the nasty sight of George's grotesque eye exercises. He, like the congressman, had experienced a feeling of giddiness at the nape of the neck and decided against mentioning the incident. Af-

ter gazing upon a pair of air-borne eyes which have just crossed themselves in their zeal to convey the charm of the rake, one is generally loath to bring the subject up with anyone save the local psychiatrist. However, had either gentleman had the least inkling of the mad delights yet to come, they might have well bolted the room, shouting the news to the world.

The fact was that Toffee, in her endeavor to hypnotize George, was meeting with extraordinary success. Having gazed into George's eyes with his full cooperation it was only the matter of a moment before the hapless shade was completely mesmerized. The eyes, under Toffee's steady gaze, grew heavy, drooped, closed altogether, then reopened with a slightly dazed appearance. It was not a pleasant sight, but Toffee appeared to find satisfaction in it.

Not so, however, the judge and the congressman. Watching these developments with sidelong anxiety, they were sore put to it to continue with the business at hand.

"Yes, yes," the judge said vaguely, "you were telling me about this blackguard who's been saying all these filthy things about you . . .?"

"Eh?" the congressman said, starting. "Oh! Oh, yes. This fellow, the blackguard. I was saying that if he was half a man . . .!"

The congressman got no further for it was precisely in this moment that Toffee commanded George to materialize. There must have been,

however, a lack of authority in her tone, for the results fell short of perfection. In fact, they fell short by exactly fifty percent. George, starting at the top of his head, blossomed rapidly into being down to the waist and there, quite devoid of his lower quarters, stopped. In effect, no sooner did the congressman speak of half a man than the order was filled to exact specifications. The congressman not only stopped speaking, but stopped breathing as well.

A NERVOUS hush fell over the courtroom, for by now several others had begun to notice the half-portion George and were just as reticent to mention the matter as either the congressman or the judge. The judge clutched grimly to the bench for support and forced himself to look away. He laughed a dry, cackling laugh.

"Well, well," he said with feeble heartiness, "we mustn't fall into a reverie, must we? You haven't half—I mean you haven't really begun to tell me about these slurs against you, congressman."

There was something markedly distraught in the congressman's expression as he turned back to the bench. He fiddled with his tie, reached into his pocket, took something out and began to finger it nervously. It was Toffee's gadget.

"Well," he babbled. "I was only saying that anyone with half—I mean any mind at all would be able

to see . . . uh . . . see . . ."

As he spoke, the congressman turned the gadget absently in his hand. It was on the fifth turn, when it was pointing directly at the judge, that his finger inadvertently snagged against the button and shoved it to one side. Instantly, as though the judge had never been there at all, the bench was starkly and dramatically deserted, with only the gavel left to mark its recent occupancy. The congressman gaped unbelievably, shook his head, closed his eyes, then opened them again. The judge was still absent.

The congressman turned to the others and found himself and the bench the focal points for a sea of shocked eyes. He shuddered, pressed the gadget self-consciously in a fit of nerves. The button snapped in the opposite direction. In the next instant there was a shrill scream from the faded blond.

Those in court turned in unison to find that the judge, just as suddenly as he had departed, had reappeared. This time, however, he was comfortably ensconced in the lap of the distraught blond. In a courtroom where many odd things had recently taken place, it was the general consensus that when the judge of that court sneaks from the bench, creeps up on the nearest blond and hurls himself into her lap, some sort of climax has been reached. A murmur of indignation rose through the room.

The blond, for her part, agreed

with the concensus, but did not stop at an indignant protest. Doubling up her fist she belted the judge a nasty blow in the eye.

"You mangey old goat!" she shrieked.

The congressman, by now in a veritable frenzy of nervousness, pressed the button again. This time it was Toffee who disappeared. The murmur in the court became still more disturbed. The congressman twiddled the button in the opposite direction.

Miraculously, Toffee appeared behind the bench in the judge's position. She picked up the gavel and banged for attention.

"The court will come to order!" she shrilled happily. "Knock it off, everybody!"

A NEW kind of hush fell over the room. The congressman, slack-mouthed, looked up at Toffee with the fearful look of a man who has finally been backed to the wall on the question of his own sanity. The judge, nursing a blow on the left ear as another was being addressed to the right, looked up in horror.

"Here!" he yelled. "Get off that bench!"

"Get off that blond!" Toffee shot back. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself." She whirled about on the trembling congressman. "As for you, you big fat traitor, I want a clean confession and no nonsense."

"I don't have to talk to you," the congressman said uncertainly.

"You can't make me say anything."

"Maybe not," Toffee said, "but what about your conscience?"

"Conscience?" the congressman said uncertainly.

"The term is unfamiliar to you?" Toffee said. "I'm not surprised. Let me try to explain it to you. A guilty conscience can play awful tricks on people." She eyed the congressman closely. "It can even make you think you're seeing things, for instance."

The congressman's eyes widened with an awful fear. "See — see things?" he quavered. "What kind of things do you mean?"

"Well," Toffee said reflectively, "say a man is responsible for another man's murder. If his conscience gets ahold of him he may begin to see that man as still alive. He may even see two such men, just alike. In really bad cases the subject is likely to imagine one of the men in a state of mutilation, say cut in half. Of course, that's pretty extreme."

The congressman glanced compulsively in George's direction and turned ashen. George, still at half mast, stared back at him with fixed blankness. The congressman groaned.

"Then there's the very worst sort of conscience," Toffee went on. "That's when everything gets mixed up. Through a close study of recorded cases, we find that the first attack commonly occurs when the criminal is confronted with his

crimes, usually publicly, as in a court of law."

"H-how do you mean?" the congressman whispered. "Whu - what happens?"

"Well, everything begins to appear to be just the opposite of what it really is. There is a famous English case in which the victim was so far gone that he actually believed that the magistrate on the bench had become a beautiful girl. He described the illusion, I believe, as a gorgeous redhead with an exquisite figure and legs too perfect to be true." Toffee laughed gaily. "Can you imagine anyone getting themselves looped up to that extent?"

The congressman forced a laugh that had all the light-hearted spontaneity of a coffin lid being pried up at midnight. "That boy was really gone, wasn't he—your honor?"

"Call me Ralph, old man," Toffee said.

"Of course, Ralph, old boy," the congressman said, blinking.

EXPERIMENTALLY, Toffee opened a drawer under the bench and withdrew a large black cigar. Inserting this into her month, she leaned forward toward the congressman. "Gotta light, friend?" she enquired.

The congressman started back sharply at this new incongruity. It was a moment before he recovered.

"Sure," he said, taking out a

lighter and waggling it beneath the cigar. "Sure thing."

Taking a healthy puff on the cigar, Toffee leaned back luxuriously and blew out a cloud of smoke. "What say we adjourn?" she suggested. "We can slip around to the club and cut up a few touches with the boys."

"Well, all right," the congressman said, attempting a wan smile. "But . . ."

Toffee took the cigar from her mouth and leaned forward. "Yes, old man?"

"About these cases," the congressman said. "That fellow in England . . ."

"Oh, the one who thought the magistrate was a beautiful girl? It's hard to believe, of course, but you must remember it was an extreme case. The most severe ever recorded, I believe. The funeral was only a formality, of course, since there wasn't even a scrap of him recovered. Exploded, you know."

"Exploded!"

"That's right. The only thing of its kind in medical history. Poor devil went right off. With a great whopping roar, they said. The doctors said it was caused by repressed emotion."

"Oh, Mona!" the congressman groaned.

"Didn't mean to upset you, old friend," Toffee said. "It's an unpleasant thing to talk about."

"But couldn't they have saved him?" the congressman asked.

"Suppose they had gotten him to a psychiatrist or something before it happened?"

"Actually it was much simpler than that," Toffee said ponderously. "The fellow could have saved himself merely by confessing. Confession, you know, is the only thing for a bad conscience. Highly recommended by all the best authorities. Those church people are doing it all the time—can't stop church people from confessing—and you never heard of one of them exploding, did you?"

"That's right," the congressman said hopefully. His gaze travelled out the window, a clouded look of inner turmoil on his face.

"It was just one of those things," Toffee put in. "One minute this chap was standing there in court just as hail and hearty as beans and the next—boom!—and the spectators were whisking him off their coat sleeves and passing round the cleaning fluid!"

The congressman whirled about in a convulsion of anguish. "I confess!" he blurted. "I confess *everything!*"

"Not everything," Toffee said. "Leave the racy personal stuff for another time."

The congressman reached out the gadget and dropped it on the bench. Toffee picked it up as he followed that contribution with a key.

"There's the key to the store-room," the congressman said, "and the one to the private files. And

here's a list of the members of the organization." He started as Rooney stepped forward and took him by the arm.

"Take him away," Toffee said blithely. "Find him a cell with lots of padding. And take his body-guard too."

AS the congressman and the thug disappeared in the custody of Rooney, Toffee mashed out her cigar, quitted the bench and proceeded across the court where the blond was still throttling the judge.

"Better let him up, honey," she advised gently. "He's turning a very nasty blue."

The blond stopped to consider the judge's complexion and let him drop to the floor.

"Loathsome old bore!" she hissed as he sat up and rubbed his neck, then got to his feet and tottered off toward the bench. "That'll teach you next time."

Toffee moved on to Marc. "Well, don't just sit there," she said, "Let's get at it."

Marc looked up apprehensively. "At what?" he asked.

"Everything," Toffee said spaciouly. "On the town."

"Haven't you had enough excitement?" Marc asked wearily.

"Not of the right sort," Toffee said. "What I crave is soft lights and wine and all that sort of elegant truck. Come on."

"What about George?"

"Oh, yes," Toffee reflected, "there is George, isn't there?" She regarded the transfixed half-spirit thoughtfully. "It would serve him right if we just left him here, cut off at the pockets. Still I don't suppose it's the thing to do . . ." A look of inspiration came to her face. "I know."

Taking her gadget from beneath her arm, she levelled it at George and pressed the button. Instantly George disappeared entirely. Toffee replaced the instrument and turned to Marc.

"There," she said brightly. "George in the handy pocket size, where he can't do any harm. Now we're all set for a life of gin and sin, and no interruptions."

"Now, wait a minute!" Marc said. "We're not set for anything, much less a life of gin and sin as you so pungently put it. Do I have to remind you that I have a wife to think of?"

"I don't care if you have a whole regiment of wives to think of," Toffee said testily. "I've protected and preserved you and, by gum, you're mine. At least right now. Your wife can just take her chances on what's left."

"If you continue with this scandalous talk," Marc said, shocked into primness, "I'm going to be forced to get up and walk right out of here."

"You take one step without me," Toffee warned, "and I'll break both your legs."

"Oh, well . . ." Marc sighed.

"That's better," Toffee nodded. "Of course I'll need some clothes, something terribly expensive and revealing . . ."

SHE broke off as the doors of the courtroom burst open and Julie, followed by the three doctors from the hospital, charged down the aisle.

"My God!" Marc cried. "Julie!" He swung around to Toffee. "Go away! Vanish!"

"I'm darned if I will," Toffee said. "I've stuck by you through all the thin and now I want some of the thick of it."

"Don't worry," Marc said miserably. "Just wait till Julie sees us; things will get thick in a hurry."

Even as Marc spoke the atmosphere began to congeal swiftly. Julie, having caught sight of the curious tableau formed by Marc and the scantily clad Toffee, jarred to a stop, digging her heels into the floor. A sharp, enraged sound came from her lips.

Julie, after her experience of the night before had recovered her physical faculties, but her emotional condition was still skittish. A wife, summoned to identify her dying husband, rather sets her mind on a scene of tearful sighs and murmured remembrances, with perhaps a touch of violin music in the background. When she finds her waning spouse looking perfectly alive and perky and in close proximity

to a dangerous looking redhead, her bubble has a tendency to burst with a considerable bang.

"*Marc Pillsworth!*" Julie screamed. "Who is that woman!" And raising her handbag aloft she proceeded forward with mayhem unmistakably number one on her agenda.

Groaning, Marc rose from his chair. "She's going to kill me!"

Meanwhile, the doctors had also caught sight of Marc.

"There he is!" the first doctor said. "We'd better close in on him fast."

"It's amazing," the second doctor mused. "The man must be living sheerly on the energy of hysteria. He should have been dead hours ago." He turned to the third doctor. "Do you have the chloroform ready?"

The doctor nodded and exhibited a can and a large sponge. "Wait till the Medical Association hears about this," he said excitedly. "They'll never believe it!"

Thus armed, the men in white pressed forward close in the wake of Julie.

Marc retreated in confusion toward the bench. "They're all after me!" he cried. "I can't stand much more of this. If just one more character tries to kill me . . . !"

THE doors of the court swung open and a tall, grim-lipped man barged into the room and down the aisle. He was carrying a large

meat axe. Across the room the blond leaped joyously from her chair.

"Darling!" she yelled and ran to meet him. They came together in a tight clinch just inside the gate. "How did you find me, honey?"

"Bureau of Missing Persons," the man said cryptically. "Where is he?"

"Who, sweet?"

"This creep who kidnapped you. Point him out."

The blond glanced around. "That's him," she said, pointing, "the one with all those people following him."

The man observed Marc's retreating figure with a professional eye. "Not much meat on him," he judged, "especially around the shank." He shoved the blond aside. "This'll only take a second."

"Mother in heaven!" Toffee cried, "the whole population is out to get you." She pulled Marc out of reach of Julie's bag as it made a broad swipe at his head. "Come on, let's join the judge!"

Together, they raced around the bench and started to mount to the chair.

"Get away!" the judge screamed, taking in the ranks of Marc's attackers. "Don't come up here!"

"Sorry," Toffee said, leaping lightly up beside him and snatching up the gavel. "This is total war!"

Marc gaining the bench, turned his attention to Julie. "Please, dear!" he cried. "There's nothing

to be sore about!"

"Oh, isn't there?" Julie gritted. "What about that naked little trull you're with?" She hefted the bag anew.

"Let me at him!" the enraged butcher bellowed from the flank. "I'll get him if I have to hack that bench away around him!"

In answer, Toffee brandished the gavel in a wide gesture of defiance which terminated solidly on the side of the judge's nose.

"Ouch!" the judge roared, grabbing his face with both hands. "Clear the court!"

"Hell!" the butcher yelled. "I'm going to smear the court with that lousy kidnapper!"

The siege of the bench raged, and it will always be a sterling testimony to Julie's physical prowess that as she scaled the bench, the lethal handbag never once ceased to twirl over her head; if it happened to strike the judge more often than anyone else it was only because her aim was deflected by her overwrought emotions. To Marc and Toffee, however, the real menace lay in the butcher and his cleaver. Only by the most adroit maneuvers with the gavel was Toffee able to delay his murderous progress with a few strategic licks on the shins.

THE doctors, on the other hand, gave themselves over more to calculated strategy. While two of them tried to close in on Marc from

the sides, the chloroformist, can and sponge held ready, crept up from the rear. They might have succeeded in this maneuver except for Toffee. The redhead, seeing that time and speed were of the essence, abandoned her attack on the butcher and sailed forward, the gavel raised in one hand, the gadget in the other. Her plan was to dispatch the flankers with a single action, then sweep on to overcome the third doctor with all dispatch. The strategy, however, was too hastily conceived to be really successful.

Marc in an effort to avoid Julie's bag, leaped forward at just the wrong moment. Throwing himself toward Toffee, he received the full impact of both the gavel and the gadget, one to the ear. He reeled to one side, stumbled and sprawled to the floor, shaking his head.

"Oh, no!" he wailed, looking back reproachfully at Toffee. "Not you too!"

But Toffee didn't answer; she was far too surprised and pleased at the sudden results of this little accident. In banging Marc over the head with the gadget, she had inadvertently sprung the switch and introduced George, completely restored to the last molecule, into the very center of the proceedings. She only regretted she hadn't thought of it sooner as she saw the attackers, in the confusion, turn on George in force.

"Stay down," she hissed and dropped down lightly beside Marc.

"While George is standing in for you, let's get out of this."

Marc rose to his knees, took in the new development and nodded. "This way," he said, indicating a door behind the bench. "I saw the judge crawling out this way a minute ago."

Together they scuttled on their hands and knees to the door. Marc edged it open, let Toffee through, then followed after. Safe, they turned back to see how the battle was developing around the bench.

George appeared to be finding himself at rather a rude disadvantage. And it is entirely conceivable that the besieged spook might well have been confused in that his last conscious moment had been the one of promised amour just before Toffee hypnotized him. Now, suddenly restored to awareness, instead of a fawning redhead, he found himself confronted by what appeared to be a select group of the worst fiends of hell.

George's gaze grew more and more terrified as he took in the swinging handbag, the slashing meat axe and the intense, determined faces of the doctors. With a single shriek of despair, as the meat axe made a swipe at his ear, he staggered backwards and vanished into thin air.

"Poor George," Toffee giggled. "I've got a feeling he checked out for good just then. He looked like a ghost who's just remembered a previous engagement."

MARC got up, closed the door and flicked the latch. He stopped, glanced around at the room. It was some sort of inner chamber, resplendent of leather and polished wood, a place of durability and hard surfaces, lighted by a large brass lamp standing on an enormous oak desk. At the far end of the room a door stood ajar, opening onto a hallway which pointed the direction of the judge's recent escape. Marc crossed to it and closed and locked it.

"Well," Toffee said, perching herself lightly on the corner of the desk. "This is more like it. Private."

Marc turned wearily from the door. "Just leave me alone," he sighed. "Just let me sit down somewhere and relax. This is the first time in almost twenty-four hours that I haven't had someone at my heels trying to kill me."

"Poor Marc," Toffee said. "You do need a rest."

Marc started across the room toward a large leather-covered chair. He was nearly there when he caught his foot in the lamp cord and fell.

Even as he struck the floor he was aware of the crazy see-saw flashes of light traveling up and down the wall. It wasn't until he rolled over, however, that he saw the lamp teetering precariously on the edge of the desk just above his head. He started to cry out, but before he could force the sound to his lips the lamp slipped beyond the edge and plunged downward. It

seemed to explode in his face . . .

IT grew out of the darkness, a place of familiar beauty. The light came slowly like the first faint tracings of dawn, etching the gentle slopes, the intricate, clustered outline of the forest.

Marc looked around at Toffee who was sitting beside him on the rise of the knoll. In the glowing half-light she was beautiful beyond words.

"I ought to break your thick skull," she said. "Will you never learn to pick up those huge feet of yours?"

"Huh?" Marc said.

"Tripping over that damned cord just when we'd gotten away from them all. Big-footed oaf."

"Oh, golly, that's right," Marc said. "We're back in the valley."

"You're darned tootin' we're back in the valley," Toffee said fretfully. "And that means it's all over. No high-life, no snaky-dressed, and no . . ."

"There wouldn't have been any of that anyway," Marc put in hastily. "It's just as well."

"Don't be too sure," Toffee said with a sidelong glance. "All I needed was a few more minutes and . . ."

"What happened to your gadget?" Marc asked, changing the subject.

Toffee picked up the instrument from the grass beside her and shook it. It made a loose rattling sound.

"I broke it when I hit you over the head with it." She tossed it away from her and it rolled down the slope and out of view. "It's served its purpose." She turned to Marc. "That is if you'll just stop making people want to kill you."

"I feel all dented and scratched," Marc said. "But I guess I'm all right."

"You'd feel more dented and scratched if I'd gotten ahold of you," Toffee said. "For instance . . ."

Suddenly she twined her arms around his neck and kissed him. For a moment Marc felt that he must have gotten mixed up with a metal clamp.

"Gee whiz!" he said as she released him.

"That's just the beginning," Toffee said. "I like to ease into these things. After that . . ." She stopped as the light of the valley began to dwindle. "Oh, damn!"

Marc looked around at the valley in the rapidly diminishing light. A small pang of regret flickered deep inside him. He felt himself drifting off into the growing darkness.

"Goodbye, Toffee," he whispered. "Goodbye."

He felt the light caress of her hand on his cheek.

"So long, you lovely old reprobate," Toffee said. "Don't you dare forget me . . ."

And then the darkness was complete and Toffee and the valley

were gone in a swirling haze.

MARC stirred and there was a small thud beside him. He opened his eyes and looked around; the thud had been the lamp rolling off his chest. He forced himself to sit up.

There was just enough light from a small skylight above to see that Toffee was no longer there. He hadn't really expected that she would be. He shook his head briefly to clear it. The memory of Julie and the others in the courtroom came to him.

He had to get out of there. He had to get home. He could wait there and explain things to Julie—somehow—when she returned. He got to his feet and gazed bleakly down the long, unshapely stretch of his own bare legs.

It wouldn't do to go wandering around on the streets like that. Remembering that he had noticed a closet when he'd first entered the room, he made his way to it now and opened the door.

The only thing in the closet was the judge's discarded black robe. Marc regarded it for a moment but nonetheless took it off the hanger. It was much better than nothing. He slipped the robe on and crossed to the door leading into the hallway.

He unlocked the door and opened it. The hallway was deserted. It led toward the back of the building and outside. Marc quitted the room

and quickly traced the hall to a set of outdoor steps leading down to a parking area. He started forward, then drew back as a figure appeared from around the far corner and made for one of the cars. Then suddenly he stopped as he realized that the figure was Julie and she was on her way to their blue convertible.

"Julie . . . ?" he called.

Julie, whirling about, caught sight of him and screamed at the top of her lungs. Having expressed herself thusly she leaped for the car, tore the door open and threw herself inside. Then, slamming the door and snapping the catch, she started fumbling feverishly in her bag for the keys.

Marc hastened down the steps and across the lot. He banged on the car door.

"Julie!" he cried. "Listen to me! I can explain about the girl. She was only helping me trap the congressman. She's gone now. Julie, are you listening?"

Julie paused in her frenzied gropings and looked out at him. She lowered the window just a crack with an unnerved hand.

"Beat it, you—you apparition!" she quavered. "I can't see you, I really *can't*! So it's no good your pretending you're there. You're not, and I know it. Go away!"

"Apparition?" Marc said. "I'm no apparition. Julie, it's me—Marc!"

Julie's gaze steadied a trifle. "You're sure?" she asked. "You're

really there?"

"Of course I am. Let me in the car, please, dear."

SHE hesitated, but in the end she opened the door, reached out gingerly and touched him. Then, with a smile of reassurance, she slid over to make room for him beside her.

"Oh, Marc!" she cried. "I'm so glad it's you. I thought I saw you just sort of fade away in there and. . . I guess I've been out of my mind with worry."

Marc reached out an arm and drew her close to him. "It's all right, dear," he said. "It's all over now."

"But the doctors said you had to be operated on. They said you were dying."

"Oh, that," Marc said hedging. "Well—that was just a gag, a trick to make the congressman expose himself. Where are the doctors now?"

"Asleep," Julie said.

"Asleep?"

"Yes. It seems that one of them got excited and spilled a big can of chloroform on all three of them. They looked very relaxed when I left."

"Probably needed the rest," Marc said. "They seemed quite energetic." He patted her shoulder. "So do we. Shall we go home?"

Julie nodded. Marc started the car.

"Marc . . . ?"

"Yes, dear?"

"About that girl, the one with red hair. That was very silly of me, wasn't it?"

"Silly?" Marc asked.

"The way I got it into my head that there was something between you two. That was silly, wasn't it?"

"Very silly," Marc said. "I don't know how you ever thought of such a thing." He turned and smiled at her. "But I forgive you."

Julie moved closer. "Thank you, dear," she murmured. "You're very kind and understanding. Besides, if I'd just stopped to think about it I'd have realized she wasn't the kind you'd ever give a second thought."

Marc backed up the car and headed out of the lot. "Of course not, dear," he said. A smile played at the corner of his lips as he gazed off into the distance. "Never a second thought . . ."

* * *

George approached through the mists, his ectoplasm disheveled and drooping. As he moved toward the sentry station it was all too apparent that here was a shade in low spirits.

"George Pillsworth, spiritual part of the mortal Marc Pillsworth reporting in from leave," he announced listlessly.

The sentry, a gross spectre of the lower sort, jugged his head out of the opening. "Hot dawg!" he

said. "Wait'll the Council gets a load of you!"

George looked up wearily. "What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Just after you took off, word came through that Pillsworth was as hail and hearty as health biscuits. They've been waiting up for you ever since. Boy, are you in for a welcome!"

George shrugged and sighed heavily. "Back to the Moaning Chorus, I suppose?" he said.

"You know it, brother," the sentry nodded, and leaning forward he swung the gates open in a wide gesture. "Pass on, George Pillsworth, spiritual part of the mortal Marc Pillsworth. Come and get it, kid."

George drifted disconsolately through the gates and toward the Council Chambers which loomed

large and formidable through the swirling mists ahead. Slowly, softly he began to hum to himself, a tune of great melancholy and gentle discord. He paused, hummed the tune again.

"Not bad," he mused, "not bad at all. With a little arranging it might go over big."

Humming the tune again, he resumed toward the chambers. He shrugged, dusted his ectoplasm and smoothed it down.

Now that he stopped to think about it he was sort of relieved to be back. Certainly the Moaning Chorus couldn't be any more exhausting than what he'd just gone through on Earth. And, coming right down to it, those humans down there were beginning to get a little spooky lately . . .

THE END

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ Charles F. Myers ★

(Concluded from Page 2)

some of my theatrical friends who were then in variety work, had begun to incorporate my letters into their acts, using them as routines. Before I knew it I was in business, writing special material. It was the start of a habit that has remained unbroken ever since. The thought that by spreading words out on paper I might be able to entertain people all over the world was just too

much for my susceptible ego. I'd caught the bug and was—and am—absolutely incurable.

As for Toffee, well, she's our favorite gal—on paper, at any rate. She may give us trouble now and again, but then she's a woman, and we get an awful wallop out of her just the same. We only hope you enjoy her half as much as we do.

—Charles F. Myers

Wristwatch Radios

THE future seems to come on us with breath-taking swiftness. Predictions and ideas which have been hovering in the air for decades suddenly blossom into fact overnight. It was that way with television and the atomic bomb—and it still is that way with a lot of lesser things.

The long-proposed "Citizens' Radio" for example is well on its way. People spoke of the time when everyone could contact everyone else through the simple expedient of a "wristwatch" transceiver. The idea was to link each personalized radio through a sort of central exchange so that you'd use your personal transceiver to make calls no matter where you were.

That is coming, and the first step has already been taken. In one city doctors are able to buy very small radio receivers little larger than the palm of the hand which are tuned to a central service (just like radio cabs). When the doctor hears his special call number he reports immediately to his hospital and checks in. Thus at all times he's linked with his office!

The extension of this service to a two-way system won't be hard because the miniaturization of radio components is no longer an art but an accomplished fact. It's possible to build a complete transceiver in a match-box! And undoubtedly some genius will design one for a lady's compact!

Matador — With Jets!

IT'S been a long time since the end of the Second World War, but every now and then a ghost comes out of the past to haunt the scientists of today. The latest ghost is a variant of the familiar "V-1" used for a short time with devastating effect against London. But this is a souped-up version, less a robot than the V-1 and more a guided missile, and it makes its predecessor look like a tin Lizzie.

The "Matador" as the guided missile is called is a sleek ram-jet, looking much like a conventional airplane—but without a pilot. Its innards are a maze of electronic gadgetry and it derives its thrust from a simple "stovepipe" ram-jet which sucks in air as it plows through, and from its tail lances a fiery flaming jet. The Matador goes after the huge

aircraft bulls like its namesake, at more than six hundred miles an hour, its electronic brains guiding it unerringly to its target. It is the first of the operational guided missiles used by the Air Force; with enough Matadors in the air an impermeable umbrella of explosive can be put over a place through which no bomber or group of bombers can fly.

An auxiliary rocket motor kicks the missile into the air, its jet takes over then and with incredible speed and accuracy it "homes" on the target a hundred miles away. You can be sure that if the Services released information on this killer, it must be merely the baby of a long line to come. Who can imagine the fantastic missiles in the brains of scientists and on the drawing boards!





THE RELUCTANT HERO

By
Daniel F. Galouye

Art Bronson was willing to solo any flight to the Moon,— any flight, that is, but man's first one. Yet that was the trip he was forced to make!

ART BRONSON was awake before he heard the first bird send its grating notes into the thin Rocky Mountain air. The effects of the sleep booster had worn off early and he had spent the last

couple of hours shifting position restlessly under the covers.

But now the sun had risen over a far peak and its warming rays were beginning to tint the room through partly drawn curtains.

This was the day!

Had Columbus felt the same way? Had he, too, lain awake on the morning of departure and damned every nerve-tingling sound that assailed his ears?

Art pushed the covers aside reluctantly and sat miserably on the edge of his bed. A shiver ran through him and he realized his mouth was dry. But it wasn't cool in the room. And a pitcher of water wouldn't have downed the lump that crammed his throat like a wad of cotton.

Only vaguely aware of physical action, he stepped into slippers and crossed the room to the window. There was a thin layer of dust on the outer surface of the panes. He would have to report it. He made an attempt at a smile . . . Funny, how the mind turned to inconsequential things in times of intense crisis. Had Columbus gruffed about a loose plank on the wharf when he boarded the *Santa Maria*?

Thinking suddenly of the ship, he let his eyes rove over the cleared area in front of the officers' quarters, taking in the panorama of scurrying cars and trucks staggering up the peak to the left.

Then he gasped, tightening his fists. Had it tumbled in the night? Had some benevolent power cast it from its towering perch to snatch him miraculously from the agonizing nightmare?

But the whip of cloud brushed past the top of the tower and there it stood—like a vehement silver bul-

let, pointed upward, straining irritably at its shackles, poised tensely and waiting vengefully for the moment of terrific thrust that would give it its freedom from the gravity which made it an ignoble, earth-bound vassal.

The thrust would come today.

And the bird of space that longed for release would wing up through the earth's atmosphere—up and out into the unbounded reaches of infinity.

It was an unreal thing—that demon that squatted malevolently atop the hundred foot-tall, steel framework. Yet it was the most concrete reality that had ever been a part of his life. All that had gone before had been but tenuous, gossamer threads of illusion. Only the tower and the ship and the sprawling base in the hills that existed to administer the needs of the lifeless but deriding projectile were the sole cords of reality.

"Awake, Captain Bronson?" the voice called outside his door.

He slipped into a robe and admitted an enlisted man who bore a tray of food.

"This is it, captain!" Private Lofton's face was vivid with excitement as he placed breakfast on the night table. "How do you feel? Great, I'll bet!"

Bronson looked lifelessly at the man, hardly aware he had spoken.

"Boy!" Lofton clenched his hands. "This is the greatest day in history! Hell, captain, what I wouldn't give

to be in your place! Just think—out there, all alone, shooting through the night like a bat . . . ”

“Stow it, will you!” Art said gruffly.

But his rebuff was ineffective and Lofton's smile persisted. He shook his head admiringly, gazing venerably into Art's face. Then he left.

ART gulped the coffee down, shaking. He hid the food under trash at the bottom of the wastepaper basket. He couldn't let them know there was a tightness in his throat that prevented him from swallowing the food. Had all the explorers of history been too unsettled to eat on the day of their triumph?

Back at the window, he stared hypnotically at the upthrust finger of steel on the tower. “*That way,*” it seemed to point, “*that way is the gate to eternity!*”

Only when a myriad of needles began to stab the muscles of his legs did he realize he had been rooted to the window. He shifted his weight and the numbness slowly left.

Outside, the contagion of activity had spread into all sections of the concrete staging area. At the warehouse a pickup crew loaded portable instruments. A guard detail formed in front of the enlisted men's barracks. A truck, its engine idling, waited at the gate while its driver spoke to the guard. Bronson read the lettering on its side panel: “NBC-TV.” Behind was a line of

automobiles. Placards announcing “PRESS” were pasted on the windshields of most.

Sirens set up a wail and a limousine with five stars emblazoning its door panel slipped past the line behind two motorcycles and streaked for the administration building. A minute passed and other sirens took up the cry from somewhere down the mountain.

This time eight motorcycle patrolmen and a Packard filled with grim-faced men preceded the limousine that roared through the gate and pulled up in a stall next to the general's car.

Art had never seen the President before. Odd, how he had always thought it would be a thrill. Soon he would be introduced to the man. But he knew, somehow, the introduction would leave him no more impressed than if he had been allowed to shake the janitor's hand instead.

A generator near the tower set up a sudden whine and Bronson jumped. He swallowed, his breath escaping erratically through trembling lips. He held his hands, fingers outstretched, in front of him . . . Hummingbird wings, he thought, placing them in his pockets.

Why the hell did it have to be him? There were only eighty million other men in the country—at least fifty thousand of them as qualified as he was. And there were two stand-by pilots. Why couldn't one of them

take up the *Christopher Columbus*? Major Peters and Captain Horton were a little heavier than he, but the weight difference was only a few pounds. And both had been eager to go. Both were disappointed when the selection board pointed a finger at Art Bronson.

Why had he volunteered and gotten into this damned predicament? Running his hand through his hair, he searched for the responsible factors that had led to his final selection . . . There was his war record and his small stature, his light weight and his so-called rapid reflexes, quick thinking, intelligence and—*courage!*

The words brought a dry laugh to his lips and he closed his eyes, trembling. He remembered the selection board chairman telling him that Horton and Peters were both familiar, speculatively, with the conditions and hazards of space and might be affected by ingrained fears, by subconscious inhibitions. They had suggested that he maintain his detachment from a scientific approach to the adventure and acquire no appreciation of those hazards.

But he had investigated, mostly through reading, and he now knew the terror of the awful nothingness of space — the incredible range of temperature. He had learned of the loneliness of the moon's surface, the unbelievable remoteness of the satellite. He had come to fear crashing at incredible speed, ramming a me-

teor thousands of miles away, plunging into the sun without fuel, or streaking outward into interstellar space.

There was still an hour left before he must report to the laboratory. Would it be an hour of thoughts that would drive him to near panic? Would the rest of the day be but an extension of the unreal phantasmagoria of insanity-provoking proportions?

A sob parted his lips and he knelt beside the bed, clasping his hands.

WEIRDLY flexible knees supported his weight as he mounted the steps of the infirmary. A nurse exited and stood aside to hold the door. But she neither spoke nor smiled. *Why the hell didn't she say something?* Was he a pseudo-deity to be stared at with awe? It had been the same throughout his dispirited walk across the quadrangle — officers and enlisted men alike stopping to gape. He snatched the knob from the nurse's hand and slammed the door after him.

"Good morning, captain," greeted Colonel Condor, the gold medical corps emblem on his lapel reflecting a sunbeam into Art's eyes. "I suppose we're in top physical condition?"

Even the colonel had reverential admiration written disgustingly on his face. Art thought of the hero-worship that was being ac-

corded him and damned it. Then he changed his mind and welcomed it as one of the few values in this chaos that was real—something he could hate with a vengeance, like the ship hated him. And hating it would occupy his thoughts, protecting his sanity.

"Will the physical take long?" he asked, startled over the sound of his own voice and wondering whether it had betrayed his fright.

"Physical?" the doctor laughed. "You had one last night. It doesn't seem likely anything could have happened since then."

He reached into a drawer and brought out a hypodermic case. "This is all I wanted to see you about." He withdrew the instrument and bared its shining needle. "Just in case you should get a case of jitters. This'll help keep you off edge."

Art took off his coat nervously.

"Not that I think you're psychologically upset," the doctor amended hastily. "But you'll find it soothing."

Colonel Condor wasn't looking at the man who was about to make the first space flight, Art realized. He was seeing the war hero—the lieutenant who had flown over two hundred missions; had been shot down twice and had earned his ace rating four times over.

Bronson rubbed the spot where the needle had entered his arm.

"I've been instructed," the colonel said, "to tell you the facilities at the

training building are at your disposal."

"Was it an order?" Art asked disinterestedly.

"Of course not. They made it clear it was entirely up to you."

Art sighed. "I think I'll pass it up. I've punched those damned mock controls so much I'm doing it in my sleep."

"I imagine so," the doctor smiled. ". . . Anyway, you've got to meet the government delegation at ten and the press right afterward. The general said to remind you."

Art clamped his teeth to keep them from chattering and strode toward the administration building with hands in his pockets.

It was a nightmare, he told himself. This couldn't be real! There was no such thing as a space rocket and a flight to the moon! It was all a fantasy! Even New Era Base was unreal! Soon the nightmare would go away and he would awaken, sweating under twisted covers.

Then he remembered Arlene! Why wasn't she here? He cursed. A wife belonged near her husband when he was about to push through an incredible, unknown veil. Did Columbus have a wife? He tried to remember, but the fleeting thought disappeared and instead he wondered why Arlene's sister had to die day before yesterday. Why couldn't Arlene have been with him until the—end? Would she get back in time? God, he winced, she had to!

Why was he forcing himself to believe she had to return? Wouldn't it be better if she stayed away? She couldn't snatch him from the inevitable. God, how he loved her! Why should he want her here to see him like this. Was it because he knew she would recognize his condition and stop him? That was it! She would stop him! *She would show them! She would . . .*

He halted the panicky thoughts with a sudden grip on himself.

The President! Why did the President want to see him? To hell with the President! That was just one more opportunity to betray his overpowering fright. And the press conference . . . Surely there would be many who would recognize the same emotions they had noticed at an execution. But if they recognized his lack of courage, wouldn't that be one way out? Wouldn't that deliver him from fate? His mind tried to turn to the consequences—the stigma, the humiliation. But he stopped it.

THE President was as unreal as everything else. And the President had a speech to make.

"You, Captain Bronson," said the President, "are the personification of all past endeavors of the human race. You are the father of the new civilization. You are the culmination of centuries of mankind's struggles to raise himself from the primordial ooze. You are . . ."

The words welled sonorously in Art's ears and the glare of the TV spotlights was hot. But the speech sounds echoed meaninglessly in his head and the warmth was chilling. Where he had expected perspiration to be dampening his forehead, there was only a sensation of intense cold—like the cold of space. Holding his knees firmly together to conceal their trembling, he was thankful for the presence of the bulky desk between himself and the cameras and newsmen.

Then he was aware all eyes were focused expectantly on him.

"I said," the President repeated irritably, "that never before in the history of our great republic has the President felt so humble before a single individual."

It was the end of the speech.

Art was expected to say something.

His mouth opened, but he had difficulty moving his dry tongue.

" . . . tain Bronson," he caught strains of a hushed voice speaking into a microphone just out of range of the cameras, "is apparently overwhelmed over the enthusiastic, stirring tribute the President has paid him. He is somewhat at a loss for an adequate reply. And so we see that this great national hero is not above humility, that . . ."

"I—I am overwhelmed, Mr. President," Art began, having long forgotten words he had prepared for the occasion. "I . . ."

"But wait!" the announcer's whisper came. "He speaks!"

"I am at a loss for a reply to such a stirring tribute. I . . ."

The President shifted uneasily. He glanced indecisively at an aide, frowned, smiled and turned back toward Art.

"I can see, my boy," he grasped Art's shoulder, "that I have embarrassed you. I did not intend to. I merely reflected the sentiments of an entire people—which is naturally a president's job . . . Shall we have a cup of coffee?"

Red lights blinked out on the cameras and Art sat at the desk with the President and several high ranking military men. Newsmen crowded around and an orderly brought coffee. The President re-entered his austere shell and the barrage of questions began.

Art didn't touch the cup. It was a trap! The liquid was to the brim and his shaking hands, he knew, would betray him.

Some of the questions he answered absently with a yes or no. When confronted with queries that required expansive explanation, he glanced helplessly at General Stanton. The general hesitatingly came to his aid.

"I'm afraid," explained Stanton after the third lengthy exposition, "that Captain Bronson is a bit publicity shy."

Art rose. "If you'll excuse me," he managed to say. "There are preparations . . ."

The President interrupted his departure. "I had intended to do this after the captain responded to my greetings," he said, taking a small box from an aide. "But I'm afraid I was taken aback by the captain's genuine embarrassment . . . Now I would like to present to *Lieutenant Colonel* Bronson a token from his country. It is not the Congressional Medal of Honor. He has already earned that award. It is, hereafter, the highest award that can be bestowed on an individual in the United States. It will be presented only to those who, in facing terrifying cosmic horizons in the interest of nation, singularly distinguish themselves . . . Colonel Bronson, I hereby bestow upon you, as a reflection of the gratitude and intense admiration of an entire country, the Space-man's Medal."

IN his room Art ripped the bauble from his coat and hurled it against the wall with a vengeance. "I don't want the damned thing!" he gasped convulsively, throwing himself on the bed.

He prayed for sleep. But the plea, he knew, would go unanswered. There could be no sleep, no rest, until—

"This is his room, all right," an excited kid's voice came through the window.

"Yeah?" chimed another juvenile. "Gosh! Do you suppose . . . ?"

"I don't know. We can ask him."

"Just think—if he signs we'll have the most famous autograph ever!"

"But suppose he don't come back?"

"Heck—it'll be worth that much more!"

Shutting his eyes and clamping hands over his ears, Art abandoned efforts to keep his body from shuddering.

It may have been a minute later, or perhaps an hour, when he rose feebly. There was no way of keeping track of time passage when each pulse was an eternity of apprehension, when each torturous sob meant he was one breath closer to eternity. The kids were gone. But the excited din from hundreds of eager throats beat relentlessly through his window. Each shouted order jarred his every nerve fibre and each clank of machinery sent a nauseous sensation racing through his abdomen.

And the ship—the damned eternal ship!—stared down mockingly at him through the port hole that was its Cyclopean eye, leering like an angry god on a hilltop throne.

Art tried to snap his mind from the paralyzing thoughts, wondering why he should cringe from the loneliness of space. He had been alone before—at sea. Over forty days of thirst and hunger and desperation and derelict desolation. There were times when he had gone out of his head—for days. But it was the physical deprivations that had subdued him—not fear, not mental concern,

not panic. Why should panic such as he had never thought himself possible of come now? Why should he find himself a cowering, almost insensible mass of wracked body and agonized soul?

He didn't have to search far for the answer. After his plane had gone down he had a life raft to cling to. There was water underneath—something material. And there was air above, clouds, an occasional bird, a fish leaping out of the water. No, he had not been alone. There had been matter, *not just nothing*, around him.

Art conjured a picture of a fish leaping in the void of space — a strange impossible monster — and laughed unemotionally. Shaking his head soberly, he banged the heels of both hands against his forehead . . . *He had to get control!*

He lit a cigarette with trembling hands, puffed on it twice and stubbed it out in the ash tray. Then he lit another. The telephone rang. He dropped the receiver clumsily before he succeeded in getting it to his ear.

"Will you eat at the officers' mess, sir, or do you want food sent up?"

He mumbled something into the mouthpiece, but when he let the receiver down in its cradle, he couldn't remember what he'd said. A few moments later, however, he knew, for the orderly entered and placed a tray on the table.

It was Private Lofton.

"Just think, captain," he beamed, "only a few more hours!"

The youth smiled more broadly than he had previously. But Art only half saw him through dazed eyes.

"You'll be gone a whole day, won't you? Think you'll be able to hit the landing apron when you come back?"

Art thought of the mile-square, paved clearing at the foot of the mountain and shuddered. He hoped the private hadn't noticed the tremor. Then he didn't give a damn if he had.

"There ought to be plenty of flat places to land on on the moon," the youth laughed. "Say!" he added as an afterthought. "How about scratching my name on a rock up there when you plant the transmitter? Then I'll be able to tell my kids the first writing ever done on the moon was my name!"

Art nodded numbly and the private banged his hands together enthusiastically and left.

Shoving the meal aside, Art became more conscious of the tightness in his throat, the emptiness in his stomach that wasn't the result of hunger, the roaring in his head and perspiration on his face.

AN ominous quiet fell like mist over the base in the early afternoon as idling truck engines were killed and workers filed into the cafeteria and mess halls. Activity continued only atop the mountain — above the timberline, where jagged rocks had given birth to the tower of steel and the streamlined ogre.

And in the silence Art thought of what lay ahead — five o'clock blast-off; the intricate balancing of jet force against jet force to mold a gentle helical flight path to the western shore of Mare Nubium; landing, and actual disembarkation to place the package transmitter. All done in the stiff confines of a space suit as a precaution against a meteor's piercing the hull.

It was as simple as that . . . Art laughed. But the laughter was an alien sound that seemed to leap back at him from the recesses of a cavern.

If only it had been done before — just once!

He didn't want the glory of being the first. He didn't want to be the dauntless explorer of his time. All he wanted now was proof that it wasn't utterly impossible.

It had been tried once before, he remembered suddenly. Just two months ago they had sent a radar controlled rocket. It had crashed. They said it failed because its controls lacked the final acute adjustments that could be given only by a human hand.

The trembling returned to his legs and his whole body shook violently.

This, he told himself, was a fear that no man had ever faced before in history: A fear no human would ever again face, as long as the race existed!

There would be others who would stand trembling individually on the threshold of space for the first time.

But there would always be the encouraging knowledge that someone had gone out there first and had proved it was possible—that death was not inevitable.

A TAXI'S brakes screeched as it killed excessive speed to stop at the gate.

Was it Arlene? He clutched the sill until his knuckles turned white as he focused eyes through the distance to identify the passenger in the darkened back seat. It was a military man. His hopes dropped.

Where was Arlene? Why wasn't she here? Certainly she knew how he needed her! She should have been back in town this morning. She should have returned to the base by ten o'clock. Always the home psychologist, was she convinced that by remaining away — perhaps even beyond the last minute—he would be harried by fewer conflicting emotions? Was her absence intentional?

Art was aware someone else was in the room . . . Arlene? Had she come? He whirled around.

"So the hour is near," Dr. Philip Werzler stood in the doorway. He crossed the floor, holding out a package of cigarettes. Realizing he had smoked only one the entire day, Art accepted the scientist's offering. But he turned to light it so Werzler wouldn't see his hands trembling.

"Think you'll make it all right?" the scientist asked.

Art gulped but nodded.

Werzler's eyes focused through the window. Bronson saw they were staring at infinity.

"Incredible swift, silent speed!" the doctor exclaimed softly, shaking his head with awe. "Speed such as no man has even nearly approached before! A flight in which man is finally freed from the relentless master that has chained him to the face of the Earth like a magnet hugs a piece of iron filing! The fierce blast of fiery jets! And the most triumphant moment that will ever occur in the infinite stretch of mortal history! — *Settling to the surface of the Moon!*"

Art was oddly grateful the scientist had come. The wild and eager speculative exclamations had snatched him at least one notch back toward sanity.

Werzler's eyes blazed and he advanced on Art, grasping his coat lapels. "You can't go! Do you hear? You have no right to go! The converter is my work! It's more than that — *it's me; it's Dr. Philip Werzler, the man who made space flight possible!* I belong in that ship when it blasts away! *I* belong at the controls — not you! *You can't steal it from me!*"

The doctor was shaking him furiously, but he did not resist. Then Werzler loosed his lapels, a frown of confusion on his face.

"*You don't want to go!*" the scientist gasped. "You're not fighting for the right to land on the moon! You

don't care!"

WERZLER lowered his voice and spoke excitedly. "It'll be simple, Bronson . . . We're the same size. You're supposed to put the space suit on in the laboratory. No one can recognize features through the dark helmet—not if you don't put your eyes too close to the glass. My voice isn't too unlike yours. They'll never know! You can stay in the lab. We'll invent a story about checking the suit for radioactivity right after landing—before the pilot even gets out of it. All you have to do is stay concealed twenty-four hours. No one will know . . . Hell, *you* can have the glory! You . . ."

The incredible tightness inside Art's chest relaxed like a bursting balloon. Could it be done? Would he let it be done?

Suddenly he sensed the motion at the door and looked up. General Stanton was there, his stern, worried face betraying the fact he had been in the hall a long while.

"You are under Army direction, Werzler!" the general said without moving his jaw. Then he nodded toward the door. It was an order.

Werzler's chest deflated and his head dropped as he walked sheepishly from the room.

"God, son!" the general exclaimed. "At a time like this our principal technician has to go crackpot! Hope he didn't upset you."

The breath left Art's lungs convulsively. But he was sure Stanton had-

n't noticed it. He let his eyes drop.

"Forget what Werzler said," the general swept an arm through the air. "Don't start thinking you're stealing any glory from him. You're intelligent enough to know he isn't a young man and, even in his wildest false conviction, couldn't handle the *Christopher Columbus*. He'll realize that himself, after the excitement of today and tomorrow is over . . . No, Bronson. Don't feel any sympathy for him," Stanton laughed. "You just go ahead and enjoy your trip."

Damn it to hell, Art thought, *why couldn't he tell the general right now? Why was he letting this double-talk of action and meaning go unamended?*

"Blastoff," the general recovered his gravity of tone, "is still scheduled for five o'clock—if . . ."

Art looked up hopefully.

" . . . If some last minute trouble can be overcome. Final tests uncovered a valve misalignment in the port jet. One of the maintenance crew dropped a piece of equipment on the control rod. There's little doubt it can be fixed in time, however. If it isn't corrected, we'll have to delay the run another day—providing the long range weather forecast is favorable."

Reaction brought a semblance of animation to Art's face.

"Well, son," the general said, "I won't be seeing you until tomorrow. I'll have to be with the President in the observation blockhouse. Good

luck, and God be with you."

Stanton extended a hand. Art clasped it, but only momentarily. A long handshake might betray his state of nerves.

The general turned around in the doorway. "Incidentally, operations has scheduled a second flight within a week. I've already recommended that you take it. Later, after we convert the *Chris* to dual controls, you can check out Peters and Horton."

A half hour later Art was still cursing the repair crew and blessing maintenance's clumsiness when the telephone rang. Its unexpected, shrill note jarred him from the chair.

Stanton's voice came through the receiver. "They've cleared up the trouble. Everything's ready. The ship's clock has been set, but you'll check on GMT at the lab to make sure your firing schedule is carried out properly . . . I'd suggest you get a shot of whisky just for the hell of it and start getting ready. You have little more than an hour."

Bronson whispered an acknowledgment and returned the receiver to its cradle.

Arlene wasn't coming! He was grimly convinced of that now. Why? She could have saved him! She would have felt him trembling as he held her. She would have recognized the approaching state of severe shock. She wouldn't have let him go through with it. And she'd have fixed it, too, so they wouldn't think he had

lost his courage.

He could imagine her arrogant, small voice as she stood before the President and the general: "You can't let him go! I'm going to have a baby! If he doesn't come back I'll die! And that'll be three deaths!"

Certainly they wouldn't blame him then for abandoning the flight so his wife would maintain her sanity and his baby would be born normally. And later, after the hop had been proved possible, he'd go out there and show them he had *as much* guts as anyone else! No one had the right to ask that he establish a new height of courage.

And now he faced soberly the fact Arlene would remain away purposefully, realizing at the same time why she had concealed her pregnancy. It was only to prevent reversal of his decision on the basis of an unborn child. But she would change her mind if only she could see his condition!

And he was not the only person in the world who would concede that prospective fatherhood was motive enough to cancel the flight. The majority would agree. He was convinced of that.

But he couldn't act until he got the signal from Arlene! The final decision belonged to her. She had to ask him not to go. He couldn't very well tell her, "Dr. Garner told me you're going to have a baby; hadn't you better stop me from going up there?"

He realized his teeth were chattering violently and his jaw was shak-

ing uncontrollably. He folded his arms to stop their trembling, but the biceps set up their individual quiverings.

He wanted to run. He wanted to race blindly across the apron and climb the barbed-wire fence. He wanted to feel the barbs rip through flesh until the physical pain shut out the torturous impulses in his mind. Then he wanted to leap to the ground outside and race down the mountain, and up another, and down again until he lost himself irretrievably in the blending of rocks and vegetation — until he lay panting on some precipitous crag. And he wanted to feel his body roll over slowly, over the ledge and drop to the darkening depths. He wanted to die. But he wanted the death to be a familiar one—one that men had died before. Not a new kind that no one had ever experienced.

He reached blindly for his hat. Then he realized it had been on his head all the while. When his eyes focused again he saw it wasn't the hat he was reaching for, but the knob of the laboratory building door. He recognized the approaching symptoms of total shock. He had experienced them before — when they had picked him up off the life raft. In his condition he couldn't possibly pilot the *Christopher Columbus*. But the idea that he wouldn't was out of his mind. He wanted to get at its controls! He wanted shock to take over while he pressed the first group

of firing studs. He wanted to imagine he was seated at the console of an organ and playing a macabre symphony with the buttons that controlled the terrific energy. He wanted the ship to arch back to Earth, even before it left the atmosphere. The image of the pointed nose ramming into a mountain top and the ensuing explosion that would hurl steel and granite into the chilling twilight air was welcomed with a vengeance. Maybe that would convince them! Perhaps they would know then that what they had asked of him was too much to ask of any man!

THE suit hung on its special rack. A ray from the setting sun leaped at him from the shining metallic fabric of the rounded shoulder and lured him forward hypnotically. There was a sudden calmness about his actions now. And his eyes were steady and his steps firm. He did not turn to look at the two attendants who watched in silent respect as he crossed the room.

"Art!"

He jolted to a stop.

It was Arlene!

Whirling, he saw her in the doorway. She ran toward him.

Her arms encircled his waist and he held her tightly as the two attendants left the room, embarrassed.

"Darling!" she cried excitedly. "I thought I would never get here!"

He didn't answer. Hope had returned! Where he had resigned him-

self to the inevitable, he had been snatched back by sudden expectancy. Arlene was here! That was all that mattered. Deliverance had arrived.

But reaction set in and uncontrolled tremors returned to his body.

"Oh, darling!" she backed off and gazed into his eyes. "I'm so proud."

For a moment the smile almost slipped off her face and he distinctively felt her trembling. But not for long. She had regained control immediately and was once more smiling buoyantly.

"I know I can't keep you too long, Art. They told me you only had a few minutes to get off on schedule and if you didn't leave on time they'd have to figure out a whole new trip. I don't understand it, honey, but all that mathematics seems so silly. Why can't you just point the nose of the ship at the moon and let it go? You might have to chase it a little, but you'd catch up with it, wouldn't you?"

He knew his face was as white and vacant of expression as it felt. But still she just stood there, grinning stupidly. Despair flooded over him again and the tightness clutched at his chest and stomach more severely than ever. Once more he was nauseated and terror was numbing his senses until he wanted to scream.

But what could he do? Did she actually want him to go? Could it be that she didn't care whether he returned? But no! There was that shiver he had felt in her shoulders.

She was as afraid as he was! And he knew it. And she knew that he knew it. And he knew that she knew that . . .

God, it was the most ludicrous thing that could happen to any man! Values meant nothing any more! It was all a web of confusing half-impulses that cancelled one another out and left nothing but a trembling shell that hid a horrified automaton. If only she would break down! If only she would faint, or scream, or sob! Anything!

But she didn't. She just stood there being stupidly conversational.

He turned away in disgust and again there was the conviction that she knew everything going on in his mind; that she was hiding the fact she knew he was disgusted and almost unbearably despondent.

She waited outside while he dressed. He was grateful for one thing: He had managed to get into the space suit before the attendants returned. When they arrived, they had only to screw the helmet on his head.

Now there was partial relief. Now he could let his head shake and his lips quiver and his eyes stare frenziedly ahead, concealed behind the semi-transparency of the plexiglass.

OUTSIDE they helped him into the helicopter. Arlene got in and sat on the passenger seat while he stood in the center of the cabin, steadying himself with a mailed hand on a side railing. And she wore the damned, eternal smile! He hated

her! No, he didn't! He loved her! Or was it just that there were no such values as hate and love any longer?

The copter was on the ground again. There had been no memory of the flight up the side of the peak. Shock was rapidly seizing command. He could not expect to maintain his grip on rationality much longer.

He clambered out of the vehicle. Through the thick material of his suit he felt Arlene grasp his arm. But it made no impression on the labyrinth of hopelessly snarled perceptions that was his conscious.

Without feeling his legs move, he stumbled across the short distance toward the base of the tower. He wanted to look back at Arlene. But the partly realized desire to see her once more didn't coalesce and he forgot about it. Then he was abruptly aware he could see her without looking back—there was a distorted reflection of her and the helicopter in the curve of the helmet above his forehead.

She was running toward him! Fright was on her face and she staggered clumsily as her high heels kicked against the slippery rocks. *She had broken! She was going to stop him!*

As he turned slowly to face her, he lost the reflection. When he completed the turn—she was no longer rushing forward! She was standing proudly erect, shoulders squared, halfway between him and the copter.

She smiled gaily and a slender arm waved encouragement. A light wind whipped the skirt around her knees whimsically and she blew him a kiss.

He was on the platform lift now and slowly rising toward the thing at the top of the tower. Below, the mountain peak was unreal. It and the base that sprawled along the mountainside and the mile-square landing area that nestled in the half-darkness in the valley were but splotches of somber shading in a grotesque painting. He could see the tense, still groups of civilians and uniformed personnel that spotted the base quadrangle like sailors' heads popping out of the sea after the Lexington had blown up. And he could see the thousands of cars stopped on the road leading up the mountain—their occupants all standing, necks upstretched, near the vehicles.

They weren't people. They were puppets playing a caricatural part. And he was a puppet too. Only, his strings dangled him in the center of the stage. But that didn't make him different. It made his false animation only more apparent. He tilted his head upward to find the master who was pulling the strings.

Then, his neck straining, he recognized the power that was manipulating the troupe of wooden actors. It leered down on him from the zenith, a little to the south—a half orb of silver brilliancy that glistened in the luster of the already hidden sun. It was the same sparkle that had cap-

tured the imagination of men for centuries. And now he was out to capture it to satisfy the imagination of men.

But it was so far away! And there was so much nothing in between!

The lift jerked to a stop and a spasm wracked his body. He tried to advance to the open hatch, but his legs moved only with the utmost effort. His entire body was quivering and his face was feverish and sweaty and his scalp was something that had detached itself from his head. He tried to draw back in horror from the yawning mouth of the monster.

But he was in it! He turned to stare out the hatch. But it was bolted!

No! he screamed to himself. He couldn't do it!

But he had seated himself in the control chair without realizing it and his eyes were glued to the watch which was a part of the metal that covered his arm.

Then he screamed.

The deafening sound, reverberating in the helmet, hurt his ears. But it was a pleasant pain and he screamed again—and again. He tried to bring a hand to his face to hide from view the buttons and switches and dials. But the plexiglass was in the way. He beat fists against the helmet and felt his throat convulse under the incessant, punishing screams.

Then blackness surged over his consciousness.

WHEN they took Art Bronson from the ship, night had already closed in on the scornful metal behemoth. His state of shock had lessened somewhat and he was partly conscious as they pulled him from the space suit and placed him on a litter. The needle stabbed into his arm and his head lolled on the ambulance-borne stretcher.

He opened his eyes and the leering moon, shining through the side window of the ambulance, was the mocking thing that commanded his vision.

Arlene was there. He hadn't seen her, but he had sensed her presence. Then he felt her hand on his forehead and closed his eyes, moaning. There was the impression of another needle slipping into his arm and unconsciousness surged out of the depths of his mind.

But he didn't want to be unconscious! He wanted to be fully in control of his faculties so he would hear everything they would say to him. He had cringed enough! Now he was ready to face courageously anything their reactions would direct them to hurl at him. Fighting the drug, he forced open his eyes . . .

Sunlight poured through the window and etched brilliant designs on the light green walls of the infirmary room. It was morning. And Arlene was still with him.

Suddenly she was crying and her head was on his chest. Responding to no definite emotion, he let his fin-

gers play absently through her hair.

"I couldn't try to stop you," she sobbed. "If you were going to call it off you had to do it yourself. Otherwise you would have hated me and yourself for the rest of your life. But I knew, darling—I knew that if you really thought you couldn't make it you wouldn't take off."

A cough sounded at the door and Art turned to look at General Stanton.

"Want to hear some sweet music," the general smiled, walking to the public address system loudspeaker above the bed. "We hunted like hell for it yesterday before we realized the damned thing must have slipped frequency."

He turned up the volume.

A rapid sequence of *dits* and *dahs* filled the room.

"Translated," the general laughed, "it means:

"'MOON CONQUEST ACHIEVED BY THE UNITED STATES.'"

"The first broadcast from Mare Nubium . . . Incidentally, Werzler says the next time you put the *Chris* down, try to get it closer to the near edge of the landing area. Makes dismantling less of a job."

Incredible realization flooded through Art's mind as he felt a startled expression play on his face. Scratching further into the nearly hidden channels of memory, he smiled . . . Of the entire twenty-four hours, shock had released his conscious mind only for one fleeting moment—when he had blasted off from the moon. The memory was vague, but it was a positive one.

"I'll be ready for that hop next week," he said, smiling at Arlene.

Proof that the jaunt was feasible had already been established. Now Art Bronson wanted to see how it felt to walk on that piece of land two hundred and forty thousand miles away.

THE END

Sex — Predetermined!

FOND parents-to-be wishing for a boy always get a girl—and vice versa. The immutability of this sexual "law" may be changed eventually in light of some recent experimental work. Ordinarily, in mammals particularly, the sex of the unborn child is fixed almost from the moment of conception. In lesser creatures scientists have had some success in producing a given sex at will by chemical means.

However there has been a suc-

cessful experiment of a pregnant opossum, in which the sex of the unborn young was altered from initially female to male by means of injections of the estrogen hormone.

That the experiment worked with mammalian life shows that there is a possibility that it might with humans. The future may enable us to select the sex of the children we wish to rear—and by scientific means.

* * *





“THIS WORLD IS OURS!”

By Emil Petaja

ORION was something new in science fiction magazines; it printed stories about aliens and passed them off as the truth—which they were!

“**H**E must die. It will look like an accident.”
“Shouldn’t we take him back with us?”

“We are far from through here. Don’t tell me you are developing a sympathy for these miserable creatures?”

"Impossible. I merely assumed he might be of some further value in our great crusade."

"He must die."

Max Field was listening at the door. He moved back so he could breathe again. Those dozens of little wounds in his chest and on his arms and neck stung like fire. His amiable young features were tense but resigned. This was the end, period . . .

Outside the little cabin an owl hooted. It was a lonely sound. But it was a familiar earth sound, and it brought a lump to his throat.

If only there was some way to outwit them. But he had thought of everything; apparently so had they. That window, for instance, was shuttered and bolted from outside. A sudden noise would bring them in here in no time. The back wall was up against a cliff. There was no outside door in this room.

He was supposed to be drunk, befuddled. But he hadn't drank any of the champagne. In that, at least, he had outwitted them. He was to die. No question about that. The only question remaining was—how.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled out the little notebook he'd been, at odd moments, scribbling the whole story in. Force of habit, perhaps. Max was a science-fiction writer. He flipped through the pencilled pages. Worth money, this story. He smiled ironically. Yet who would read it, much less be-

lieve it.

Somebody might, he decided. He would hide it somewhere in this room. Maybe slip it through a crack in the flooring, a few pages at a time.

He pulled out a stub of pencil and added that final shuddery scene.

Alice. Alice . . .

Outside, the owl hooted.

* * *

IT started, as so many stories do, with my phone ringing. I was eating cigarettes and pounding out a cover novel for *Gizmo*. If there is anything that gripes me where I live it is some joker calling me up when I'm busy producing and—

"Hello. Yeah. This is Max Field, the science fiction writer. And while we're on that subject, I happen to be—"

"I am Wallace Starr." It was a funny voice. Funny-strange. It sounded a little like rubbing two pieces of sandpaper together.

"Really?"

I pushed out my current Camel and sneaked in a few pecks at the old Underwood. So sandpaper-voice was Wallace Starr. Maybe I was supposed to turn handsprings.

"You don't know me," the heckler went on, "but I am very familiar with you and your work. I have an important project in mind. A new monthly science fiction magazine to be called *Orion*. I need a good assistant editor. You were suggested."

"*Orion*," I said.

"Yes. My book will feature a completely new approach. We will buy only the best material, and each story will concern itself with the constellation Orion and its various systems. All material will be correlated to this end. How does this strike you?"

"You won't find it so easy pinning the best writers down to Orion," I grinned. "Writers like Swain and St. Reynard and Ric Planter like elbow room."

"Orion is vast and complex. One hundred and seven solar systems, to be exact. That should provide ample elbow room."

I whistled. "Ought to. But what's the idea?"

"Novelty, Mr. Field. I have studied the imaginative magazines closely and it occurs to me that they are already beginning to specialize. One of them uses highly technical stories, another adheres to stories of other planets in this system. *Orion* will link each story with all the others in it. Instead of a hundred interpretations of the life patterns of *Orion* we shall have but one. Of course casual stories we buy will have to be revamped to fit in."

"That's where I come in," I guessed.

"Exactly. But don't you feel that we will wind up with a fascinating psuedo-history of Orion, and that such a magazine would create a furor with its realistic slant?"

"I guess so."

It tasted like my first olive. But Wallace Starr was obviously burning with enthusiasm. He sounded just a little like a crackpot. A rich crackpot, maybe.

"It will be hard work, Mr. Field. But rewarding. Are you prepared to accept my proposition?" He spoke like a man who means business.

I hesitated. It is well-known that the mortality rate among new fiction magazines is high. I had writing contracts to fill, I was doing okay. Editing a monthly is a full-time job.

"About salary—" I hinted.

He named a figure that made my hair curl. What could I say but, "When do we start, Boss?"

STARR wasn't like any editor I've known. He wasn't like an editor at all. He wasn't much like *anybody* I've known. Which puts him in a class all by himself. He was brown and thin and had peculiarly big eyes, like a grasshopper's.

He spent so much money getting started I figured he wasn't long for this racket. But he did have a knack and the first couple issues, while not wildly successful, went over well.

One morning he called me into his office. From the tone of that dry voice of his I knew I was in for it.

"What's all this?" he buzzed, rattling a manuscript in front of me. From the cheap yellow paper I knew it was the lead novelette of the forth-

coming issue. Ric Planter was one of our top writers and also a very bad boy. Ric loved to put an editor on the spot, bless his little pointed head.

"Didn't he change that ending?" I asked. The tic in my left eye started up. I had never had this twitch until the first time I saw Starr. I think it was something about those eyes of his. Every time I looked at him . . .

"He changed it all right!" Starr hissed. "He turned the Kiriki into villains. When their benevolent plan to spread patterned contentment throughout the circle of outer planets was just taking hold he had the semi-civilized Green Ones rise up and destroy their power by smashing their means of telepathic communication."

"How could he do that?" I clucked.

"Supersonic wave interrupter of some kind."

I hadn't meant that, and somehow I couldn't help grinning. Trust Ric to latch on to the Kiriki vulnerable point. The Kiriki, as Starr had outlined them, were highly communal. Like our ants, only very much more advanced. They depended on this intricate pattern of inter-communication, mind with mind, for their very existence, since each Kiriki was by birth fitted to perform only one basic function in their communal society. Their ingenious "Army of Patterned Contentment"

was helpless, when reduced by the adaptable Green Ones to individuals.

"Will you please stop laughing," Starr rasped. "This hack writer of yours has outraged the history of an ancient, noble race!"

"I didn't get a chance to read his revision," I defended myself. Starr had grabbed it off my desk as he went through. "I told Planter the Kiriki were good guys, not bad guys."

"Good guys, bad guys!" Starr cried. "How naive can we be. Let us hope that our readership is on a different intelligence level, otherwise our great plan will fail miserably."

IT was the way he said it, and I don't think he meant to. He was mad and the fact that my dialog had lapsed to comic book levels gave him the idea, perhaps, that I was too dumb to worry about. There had been other hidden meanings behind other things he'd said or done. My subconscious mind was working on it.

"What plan is that?" I ventured mildly.

"Never mind! Get busy on this—this *libel*."

My left eye twitched. "Okay. I'll change it myself. I know Planter's style. By the way, when am I getting that secretary you promised me? My desk's flooded. I need a girl bad."

"Ah, yes." It was supposed to be

a smile, I guess. "Very soon. Meanwhile, kindly fill out this form."

I took it without comment and went back to my office. This made altogether the fifth form Starr had dreamed up for me to fill out. Must be some weird complex he had, wanting to know what color socks I prefer and if my mother kept goats.

Anyhow, I grinned, as I grabbed up the phone and dialed Ric Planter's number, it gave Starr ideas for my Christmas presents for the next twenty years.

"Yeah," Ric's sleepy voice yawned. "It's me. What a head."

I passed the beef on to him, good.

"Shut up, Max," he yawned. "I was just having a little fun."

"Fun-schmun. It's my job!"

"Come off it, Maxie. Okay. Tell you what. The first outline you sent me about the Kiriki and their habits isn't nearly complete enough. Have that boss of yours dream up a more complete dossier, just for little ole me. I like those Kiriki, they're such smug, heartless devils."

"Listen, Starr's hot for them. He'll buy anything glorifying the Kiriki. They're his little dream-babies."

"Sure, sure. Here's what you do, Maxie. Get Starr to make me out a complete dossier on them, but complete. You know me. I like to use the little out of the way touches like what color they paint their toenails. I'll give him some stuff that will curl his eyebrows. Okay?"

"No more tricks?"

"Cross my cast-iron heart."

"Okay, Ric. But remember, Ric rhymes with tic."

"How's that?"

"Never mind."

THE moment Alice walked in my office I knew she was for me. I guess every guy has a girl all built up in his imagination, a girl who is and has everything he likes. Alice Corey was mine. Soft blue eyes, lots of brown wavy hair, a little well-shaped nose, and let's just say the rest of her was well-shaped, too. It was all there, including a lot of hard to define details of speech and manner that were exactly right. Maybe it was chemical, or maybe it just added up to every dream I'd ever had about my ideal girl.

"My name is Alice Corey," she said, with soft violins in the background. "I understand you need an editorial secretary." She went on briskly, when I found myself speechless, "I worked two years with Tower Periodicals in London and—"

"You're hired," I said.

"But those other girls waiting outside?"

"Would you please inform them that the job's filled—Alice?"

I had to deal with the boss about Alice. He didn't like her. She was too pretty, he thought. Couldn't be efficient. He went over her background with a fine-tooth comb. He found fault with most everything

about her. But I stuck to my guns. He had his Kiriki. Alice was mine and I was damned if I would leave her out of my sight. She filled my working hours with golden sunshine and my nights with platinum dreams.

"What's more, she *was* efficient. And she would work until twelve the night before a deadline without a murmur. She was diffident about having dinner with me, first, but as time went by we spent many an evening together, strolling in the park listening to the carousel or sipping chocolate sodas at Howard Johnson's. Alice didn't talk much, but she was a good listener. I must have told her everything I had ever thought or done during those evenings.

I was in such a sublime spin these days I forgot to worry about Wallace Starr's peculiarities. The questions that had sprouted in my subconscious began to fade. I did what I was told. So, strangely, did Ric Planter. I supplied him with a detailed outline which Starr made up about the Kiriki. That wasn't enough so we sent him another, with even more details.

He kicked through with story after story about the Kiriki. Big dramatic stories, and in each one the Patterned Contentment boys were built up higher than in the last.

Starr purred like a kitten. He raised Planter's word-rates and my

salary.

Orion caught on.

THE fans loved the idea of a pseudo-history of a whole constellation of systems. The Kiriki, with their breathtaking crusade of contentment, sweeping over system after system until finally it outdistanced Orion and tentacled out from their home system into deepest space . . . It captured the imagination. Where would it end?

Eventually we hit *Life* magazine, with a big spread. The slicks went after Ric Planter, but Starr had him tied up with an iron-clad contract. After all, the conception was Starr's. And I could see why he wouldn't let Planter hit the slicks. Because *he* could not dictate their policies. Only in *Orion* could he manipulate the strings from behind. The Kiriki were his babies and they must follow *his* pattern.

The night before our anniversary issue went to press it happened.

I had left Alice on her doorstep, just off the Drive. It was almost midnight, a blazing hot July night. Everybody and his dog was out for a breather. The Drive was alive with young lovers, old lovers, and dog lovers.

It hit me. In my hurry to get away from the office I had neglected to check with Starr about a last minute cover change. Starr hadn't been in all day. The printers would be closing the forms first thing in

the morning and I had let the change go through without Starr's okay. Starr never came in until eleven.

I found a Whalen Drug Store and phoned Starr. No answer. I called the operator and found out the line was temporarily out of order.

On impulse, I snagged a cross-town bus. I had never been to Starr's, never been invited or particularly wanted to visit him. He lived in a loft not far from Third Avenue.

It was an ordinary type building of ancient vintage. It would never cop an Oscar for beauty, nor did it smell from Chanel No. 5. I made my way up in the half-dark from one landing to another without enthusiasm. I don't know just what it is about musty office buildings, after they've been darkened and bedded down for the night; it isn't anything calculated to cheer. Six flights, and no elevator after eight.

I could see right away that Starr loved to be alone. Most of the upper-floor offices were empty. My mind snagged hold of some creepy ideas as I mounted those stairs. I thought about Starr's odd ways, his odd voice, for that matter. As if he had a machine down in his throat, a talking machine designed by a clever somebody who had once heard a human voice. About how hepped Starr was on the Kiriki, how painstakingly he had drawn' them. He talked about them as if they were

real. Of course, being a science fiction writer myself, I understood that brand of wackiness, or thought I did.

I banged on his door.

There was light pushing out under his door so I knew he must be there. It was noisy inside, which was why he hadn't heard me. I bent my ear closer. What a noise! It sounded like a bullfrog-grasshopper duet.

I banged on the door again. No answer.

I tried the doorknob. It turned. I was half in when I stopped cold. This I did not believe. Put it on a book jacket and label it Edd Cartier and I'll buy it.

I blinked to make it go away but it wouldn't. I whimpered. So it *was*—what my mind had been half-suspecting for months, and laughing at itself even as it suspected—it *was true!*

THE Thing at the machine was a giant insect. Ten feet high, at least. It was brown-green and had lots of claw-like appendages. The most terrible thing about it was its familiarity. I had surveyed it critically on half a dozen of our cover originals.

I had quibbled with our artists about it. Not horrible enough, I had said. Well, it was. It was horrible . . .

It was busy with that machine, making noises into a cone and twisting dials and knobs with its many

appendages. The noises it made were carefully inflected. Speech, in fact. It was talking into the cone, which absorbed the sounds, and transmitted them—where?

My shoes were glued to the floor.

The Thing finished talking, snapped off the machine, turned. It saw me.

It yelled and tried to duck out. It moved in a blur. Seven pairs of claws flexed out and grabbed for me. Some of the weaving cilia touched me. I screamed at the sting, like a dozen raking barbs, tearing my clothes and me.

I made the hall, yelling.

But I couldn't reach the stairs. It got me. It pinned me over the elevator shaft. I bent back further and further so those tentacles couldn't rake my face. Those criss-cross insect eyes were cold as ice, emotionless. The barbs made ready to tear me to rags.

I shrieked and let myself fall. First I didn't think to save myself. Better a clean jolting death than those hundreds of needle-like cilia. But my hands grabbed involuntarily for something. They caught the cable, clung to it.

It was greasy. I went down fast. I wrapped my legs around it, which helped a little, straining to hold back. When I hit bottom I think every tooth in my head jarred loose. My legs collapsed under me like rubber. For a minute I blacked out.

THE buzzing over my head snapped me up. I was a goner if I didn't move, but fast. Sobbing, I wrenched my legs to a crouching position, and leaped down off the elevator. I dove for the front door. Then I was outside, gulping air, running like billy-hell for the Lexington subway.

I didn't know what else to do, so having put half of Manhattan between me and It, I telephoned Alice. I needed the sound of her voice. I needed her to stop me from shuddering. My tic was slowly jerking my jaw out of alignment.

She listened patiently while I dumped in dimes.

"Max," she asked when I had finished. "Are you *sure* you haven't been eating benzedrine tablets?"

"No! And I'm not drunk!"

"Where are you now?"

"Some joint in Harlem."

"How long have you been in there?" She sounded suspicious.

"Alice!" I groaned. "If you could only see me! My suit's ripped in a dozen places. I'm all greasy where I slid down the cable and my hands are burned raw. I hurt."

"Poor boy," she soothed. She was silent for a moment, then became her briskest self. "Listen, Max. We have to consider every possibility. This might be a self-hypnotic illusion brought on by overwork. Remember, you've seen these things on many covers and interiors, too. You've lived fictionally with the

Kiriki for a year. Consider that—"

"Nuts!" I yelled. "I'm going to the police!"

"And spend the night in the drunk tank?" Alice queried severely. "Just who do you think will believe your story?"

"I can take them to this loft."

"Think, Max! What will they find? Nothing! Even if it is true, do you imagine this—this Kiriki! is going to be caught like a fish in a barrel? He has been spotted. Obviously, he will leave the loft at once."

She was so right, and I knew it. I groaned.

"Who or what is this Thing?" Alice asked, but it was plain she only half-believed my story.

"That's easy," I said bitterly. "I should have caught on months ago. It's Wallace Starr. Starr is a Kiriki."

HAVING better sense than to go home, I rented a cheap room on 125th Street. I didn't sleep much. I paced and ate cigarettes. Very early next morning I woke up a cleaner on Third Avenue and bought a cheap uncalled-for suit out of his window. It was the most uncalled-for suit I ever did see, but it fit pretty well and made me decent.

A quick coffee and I went up to the office. I had given Alice strict orders not to come to work until I phoned her. I didn't want her mixed up in this. Starr hadn't liked

her from the first. Maybe he figured she might catch on to him better than me.

I picked up a manuscript from the slush pile, called *Challenge of the Slime People*. The phone made me jump.

"Morning, Maxie. This is Ric Planter."

"Ric," I found myself blurting. "The most terrifying thing has happened!"

"Invasion of Kiriki, no doubt."

Planter had that way. You wanted to wring his neck. Somehow, the way he said it, made me backtrack. I didn't want to get the horse laugh from him and all fandom. For the first time I asked myself, *could Alice be right?* Could it have been an illusion?

"Listen, Ric, how does this sound for a plot? Suppose an alien, but alien, culture from the stars decides it wants to take over our system. They don't want to just drop in on us. They dislike physical warfare because it isn't orderly. Also they don't want to kill any of their numbers, or their potential slaves. Also a sudden alien invasion might drive humans completely off their rocker.

"So here's what they do. They send down a secret fifth columnist. His job is to spread propaganda over the planet, to prepare humans for their advent, make them amenable to this alien culture. Of course he's to build them up in human minds, make them think their cosmic crus-

ade is beneficent and noble. How would he start?"

"Buy a newspaper. Buy ten."

"Under ordinary circumstances, sure. But wouldn't it be hard to slyly mention what great guys the Whoziz are in a daily newspaper? Any comment about his home folks would stick out like a sore thumb. No. It would have to be something less obvious. How about him buying a science fic—"

A long thin shadow blotted the opaque glass door in front of me. The door opened. Wallace Starr stepped in.

"Shall I get to work on it?" Ric asked.

"Yeah. And make it good." I hung up.

Starr walked over to my desk. I picked up my letter opener.

"You might have told me," he precluded.

"What?"

"The changes naturally. I spent three hours at the printers last night. Didn't get home until after two."

HE stalked into his office and slammed the door behind him. Then I phoned the printers.

"Lemme talk to Corky," I told the girl who answered.

"Mr. Corkendahl is not here," her Brooklynese voice trilled. "Mr. Corkendahl is home in bed, on account of he spent half the night rechanging some changes for Mr.

Starr."

"Was Mr. Starr there last night?"

"Why yes."

"Sure?"

"Mr. Corkendahl informed me he was here until almost two. Mr. Corkendahl is not in the habit of prevaricating, Mr. Field."

I hung up in a daze. If Wallace Starr was definitely not in his loft apartment at twelve-thirty last night, then . . . I rang up Alice. No answer. I rang her every fifteen minutes until she did.

"Where were you?" I demanded.

"Why, Max." She sounded piqued. "All right, I'll tell you. I was up at Wallace Starr's apartment."

"But he's here!"

"I know. I waited until he left. Then I went up to the loft. I told the janitor I worked for Mr. Starr and he let me in. I went over the place with a fine tooth comb. Max, there's simply nothing there to get excited about. He's quite neat for a bachelor. Everything very prosaic and natural, except for that big amateur radio of his."

"Amateur radio?"

"You know. Amateur sending and receiving. Mr. Starr is a ham."

"H-ham?" I swallowed hard. "Alice, you're right. I'm going off my rocker."

"Just overwork," she protested, soothingly. "You take your science fiction too seriously. What you need is a nice vacation, away from the office and everything that even

smells like work."

"I'll do it," I said meekly. Right then a thought hit me. It had been simmering in my mind for a long time. Now it exploded into words.

"Alice—let's make it a honeymoon!"

She gasped. "Max, are you sure you're well enough?"

"Am I? You're just what the doctor ordered to put me back on my rollers. Will you marry me, Alice? Please?"

"Yes, Max. Whenever you say."

WE told nobody where we were going for our two weeks' honeymoon, least of all Starr. He grumbled for a while, then kicked through with a nice fat check for a wedding present, along with a bottle of good champagne. We hopped in a rented jallopy and headed north along the river.

There was a pale round moon overhead and as we got out of the city and night came on it brightened and made a glowing path on the water. After while we left the main road and headed into the Catskills. At last we dipped down into a deep little glen where there was a cosy two-room cabin I'd often rented before when I had a tough writing assignment that demanded absolute solitude.

There was no one within miles.

We unloaded the car like a couple of kids. I had practically bought out a delicatessen. Then Alice started

fussing around the cabin, putting away my fishing tackle and hanging up some curtains and pictures she had picked up at Woolworth's. I kept on pinching myself to believe she had really married me and marveling how every little thing she did suited me perfectly.

"Hungry, darling?"

"You said it!" I made a tentative bite at her ear, grinning, but she eluded me teasingly.

I uncorked the champagne, managed to spill my first glass, then decided I was too hungry to bother with it now. We ate cold chicken and all kinds of fixings. Outside the night lay deep and warm. The moon shimmered on the evergreens.

I got up from my chair and went to Alice.

Now she wanted that kiss. She put up her lips.

I kissed her.

The world rocked.

A buzzing noise sounded behind me. It made my blood crawl, because it was familiar. I jumped back from Alice just in time.

"No," I moaned. "*No—Alice!*"

But it happened.

I imagine that I'm the only man who ever kissed his bride on their wedding night, then watched her turn into a monstrous bug before his eyes . . .

* * *

OUTSIDE the owl hooted. Max Field tossed aside his

notebook and pounded his knee with his fist. God! To have *seen* that happen! To sweet little Alice!

His dream girl. But naturally. She had been too perfect, actually. She was designed for him, perhaps only a clever illusion clothed in flesh by his own imagination. At any rate she was the reason for him filling out all those forms. To discover just what he liked in every department. To give them a pattern for "Alice".

They were cute. Even to the point of having Starr pretend to dislike her. When Starr pretended to poke carefully into her background, that was enough to prevent Max from doing just that. Because actually she had no background. It was phony.

That phone call he had made to Corky. The girl who answered. That could have been Alice, using a heavy Brooklyn accent to cover her voice. She had been so convincing he hadn't bothered to check back later.

Now, the two of them were in the kitchen planning his death. "Science Fiction Editor Accidentally Killed in Mountain Retreat. Bride Stricken." Then the grief-stricken bride would carry on in his place. *Orion* was going great guns now. It really didn't need Max Field. And without him their propaganda machine could move forward all the faster—forward to the day when the Kiriki cosmic crusade moved down into this solar system. The Patterned Contentment boys would take over. Whose pattern? Kiriki, of course . . .

The kitchen door opened slowly. Max tensed.

It was—*Alice*.

She wore that clinging black lace negligee he had bought in an exclusive Fifth Avenue shop.

"Max."

He stood up stiffly, staring.

"Change, damn you! *Change!*"

"Why, Max," she pouted. "Don't you love me any more?"

It was intended to drive him nutty, maybe to suicide.

"You should have drunk the champagne," she said softly. "It would have been easier for you. Would you like a drink now?" She held out a glass.

All of a sudden he wanted that glass more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. Even Alice. It was the end of the line, the dropping off point. He couldn't take it any more. Not Alice—like that.

He walked over to her and took the glass. He lifted it to his lips.

SOMETHING slapped the glass out of his hand as the window behind them shattered inward. Alice flashed an angry glance at the face in the window, then moved quickly back into the kitchen.

"Ric!"

Max's bewilderment changed to sudden hope.

"Hurry!" Planter cried. "Get through this window!"

Max dove through while the writer yanked him by the elbows. Max

was shivering and sweating at the same time. But the cool night breeze helped a little.

"W-where in the billy-hell did you—"

"Come from?" Ric finished. "Been on Starr's trail for weeks. Had this thing figured out for some time, even before you tipped me off on the phone that day. I followed Starr here. Been watching and waiting."

He was wearing a fish-basket and, incongruously, it was filled with bombs. He handed some to Max.

"Start heaving. Aim for the kitchen door before they close it."

He tossed a handful of the bombs into the room. Max followed suit. Inside, the bombs broke, letting out a pungent gas.

"What is it?"

"Insecticide," Ric grinned. "More potent than DDT. Those outlines Starr made out furnished the clues. It should do it."

"Won't they get out the kitchen door?"

"Uh-uh. I sealed it up proper. It and the window."

The door between the rooms slammed shut but not before half a dozen bombs had got through. Ric slammed the shutters to. They waited.

"If it doesn't kill them it'll put them to sleep for hours. Basically, from Starr's dossiers on the Kiriki, they have all the vulnerable points of our grasshoppers. And fire will

destroy them utterly. I'm afraid we can't take chances, so this cabin will have to go. Match?"

THEY watched it burn down to the last slab of stilted-up planking. Max stared down at the two small charred remainders of the Kiriki advance guard and shuddered.

On the road back to New York, Max said: "Do you think they'll try it again?"

"The Kiriki? Not for a while. Like you said, they dislike war. They like it the easy way."

"Propaganda. Invasion of minds. Well, two can play at that. We'll keep *Orion* going—only we'll print the real story. We'll make men detest and despise the Kiriki so that any feelers they send down will send them hopping to the furthest end of space. Maybe we can get somebody started on that telepathic wave interrupter of yours, too. So if they do land we can cut them off from each other. We'll work on this reverse propaganda hard."

Max jerked his eyes back on the road and put his foot on the gas hard. Sure he would work, work to save his sanity, too.

It wasn't going to be easy to forget a lost dream—a dream that had lived and breathed and promised a lifetime of patterned contentment. It would take a lot of mental welding to hold back the horror of that kiss.

But he would try.

THE MISCHIEVOUS TYPESETTER

by Noel Loomis

They say that man is the master of any machine he can devise. But whoever coined the phrase didn't know about this linotype—with a mind of its own . . .

THE judge reared back. High-Pockets waited. "In my opinion," his honor began a little ambiguously, "a linotype operator is very near the bottom of the scale of humanity. There is only one person who stands beneath him. That is the poet." The judge's eyes turned full on High-Pockets, all seven gangling feet of him. "You," the judge said ominously, "are both."

High-Pockets waited in dread. He had a premonition that this wasn't even going to be a nice jail sentence where he could meditate and reflect on his strange power over linotypes. This was going to be the workhouse. The situation was desperate indeed.

"You profess to be a barnstormer and a student of mechanical nature." The judge smiled sarcastically. "I can offer you an unusual opportunity for research. As an old proofreader, I occasionally help out on the *Daily News*, and it has come to my attention that there is a linotype on the *News* known as No. 7 that recently has begun to misbehave. Without apparent reason, it has become almost useless."

High-Pockets cringed with the impact of the knowledge that His

Honor had once been a proofreader. The traditional enmity between proofreaders and operators, High-Pockets perceived, was about to be judicially resolved. So he cringed. He was very sad.

"Suppose you go up there and try your wizardry on No. 7." His Honor suggested. "In the meantime, thirty days suspended sentence. If you're back here before your time is up, it will be sixty days. And if there is drunkenness connected with it," he said, looking disdainfully at High-Pockets' red nose, "it will be ninety. Is that clear?"

"Yes, your honor," High-Pockets mumbled, but he was thinking of other things. He had been sentenced to work at his trade. That meant contact with proofreaders, and High-Pockets bristled. But the bristling subsided rapidly, as High-Pockets, simulating a grateful smile from long habit, realized with a sickly feeling that for perhaps the first time in his long career, a proofreader had had the complete and final word, and High-Pockets did not dare to answer back. . . .

They spotted High-Pockets coming across the composing-room of the



It all happened in the space of a few seconds. They had been about to set the machine in operation again when suddenly there was the sound of an angry rumble and a stream of molten lead poured forth.

Daily News when they saw a red nose following an eccentric orbit up among the fluorescent lights. High-Pockets didn't exactly duck the lights. When he came face to face with one, his incredibly tall knees limbered up and he sort of weaved under it.

The union chairman met him with a handshake. "High-Pockets Jones," he said, grinning, "Dean of Barnstormers and Wizard of the Linotype. I know you from your picture. Can you really make a linotype stand up on its hind legs and talk?"

"Well," High-Pockets said in a modest, booming voice, "I will admit that's one of my more difficult stunts."

THE chairman guffawed, and they steered High-Pockets to the slip-board. "I can put you on a week's stretch."

High-Pockets stopped as if he had walked into a brick wall. "No!" he boomed. "Can't do it! Haven't worked five days straight in twenty years."

"But look, High-Pockets. Look at it this way. You're an old-time barnstormer, aren't you?"

High-Pockets winced.

"Well," the chairman said diplomatically, "there's not as much call for barnstormers as there used to be, but—" he said it quickly — "here's a new field. It needs a good barnstormer as much as they ever did."

High-Pockets listened intently.

"This poor guy has to sit on No. 7. That's the linotype nobody can do anything with. The poor devil had to lay off because she pretty nearly drove him crazy. Now you are the guy who can make a linotype behave." His voice was persuasive. "Won't you help this guy out for a few nights?"

For twenty years it had been High-Pockets' unbroken rule not to hire out for more than a day at a time. "Short-term contracts," he insisted. But now—well, the world was changed. Maybe this was to be the future of barnstorming—taming machines instead of foremen. If so, it meant he still had a place in the world. And to fulfill that destiny he would even accept a whole week's work. He took off his rain-wrinkled coat with a sigh.

He was waiting for time to be called when Arturius Wickware, the linotype machinist on the *News*, came up to him with short, mincing steps and a scowl that undoubtedly was a habit. "Are you the guy that has such wonderful control over a linotype?" he demanded. He wouldn't give High-Pockets' the satisfaction of looking up at him. He scowled at High-Pockets' breastbone.

High-Pockets was solemn as he stared over Arturius' head. "I get along well with them." He smiled gently then. "Somehow a linotype always does what I want it to do." He looked down and saw the crowd

around him and decided he owed them an explanation. "My theory is that any piece of machinery is electrified by some force that I call personal electricity. I don't exactly know what that is but it seems to bind the piece of machinery as a whole. I think maybe it's a negative charge, and I think most men are charged positively with that same force, so that men get along well with machines. Opposite poles attract, you know."

Arturius Wickware sputtered, but now High-Pockets had to go on. "Sometimes a man comes along who happens to be negatively charged, and he can't handle a piece of machinery at all. But now I—you see this scar in the middle of my forehead—" he removed his faded hat, "I was struck by lightning on a freight train out in Utah, and I think it multiplied my 'personal' electricity potential a lot—maybe millions of times — so machinery just *has* to do what I want it to, because it *wants* to do it. You see?"

There was an odd silence; then the chairman spoke. "Old No. 7 started acting up when they built the first uranium pile south of town here, but it really went bad when it was hit by lightning that followed down the ventilation pipe two months ago."

High-Pockets' blue eyes opened wide. "Maybe its negative field was reversed by some stray rays from the pile, and then when the lightning hit it, it intensified the field

so that the machine is now strongly positive. You know how it is," he said earnestly. "A body illuminated by ultraviolet light becomes positively charged, and even a hot body becomes positively charged by what they call thermionic emission. Well, that's okay. A linotype is exactly like a woman. It has a soul—if you know how to reach it."

Old Arturius snorted so loudly the electric relay on No. 7 made contact and the heating switch came on with a clatter. "You can work on No. 7 tonight," he said acidly. "Let's see if *it's* got a soul." He turned on his heel and stamped back to his bench. . . .

It never occurred to High-Pockets to doubt his success with No. 7. He carefully hung his ten-year-old coat in an empty locker and made sure the pint of bourbon was safely in the inside pocket of the coat. Then he walked into the composing room and over to No. 7, and stood for a moment looking her over. He frowned. "It's almost as if she was laying her ears back and getting ready to snarl at me," he said wonderingly.

"She'll snarl," said Arturius at his back. "She'll *bite*, before the night's over."

High-Pockets tried to look amused. "I'll have her setting type by herself before lunch time," he promised.

HIGH-POCKETS got the lowest chair in the composing-room,

to bring his arms down near the keyboard. His nose was still red and he weaved a little in the chair, but he began to fold in his arms until his hands were over the keyboard.

The first take went smoothly. High-Pockets could feel a clash of wills, but he was slow and careful. He set two more takes, and nothing happened, so he began to relax. His third take was a short piece of telegraph copy for the second edition. He put it in the copy holder and then decided to get a drink of water. He ran into some friends and they spent five minutes around the fountain before the foreman came by.

High-Pockets went back to the machine. He sat down and got his arms tucked in, then reached for a slug with his name on it and started to put it in the stick. Then he frowned and rang the bell for the machinist.

"Somebody's playing tricks on me," he said. "Who's been working here?"

"Nobody but you," Arturius said nastily.

High-Pockets licked his lips. "I'd swear I didn't set this take." But Arturius looked intensely satisfied and went away. Thoughtfully High-Pockets took the type out of the stick and put his take slug on it and went to the dump. When he sat down again he shook his head and rubbed his eyes before he went to work. "No. 7 musta set that take

herself," he muttered, "but that's not according to union rules." He said it without actually believing it.

He got along all right until nearly lunch time. By then, he was dry again, and he got a long take of the next day's editorial and stuck it in the copy board, then went to the fountain, and finally decided to go to the wash-room and smoke a cigarette.

When he got back to the machine he picked up a take slug and pulled back the slug-stacker — and then he froze tight.

High-Pockets looked a little scared. He licked his lips and took the stick out of the machine. It was a long take, about ten inches of type. He laid it across his knees and compared it with the copy. It checked. He read it over upside down. Not a single error.

"Well, *I* didn't set it, anyway," he muttered. "*I* couldn't *possibly* set an okay proof, the way *I* feel."

Somewhat resignedly he took the type to the dump.

The dump-man looked at him. "Turning 'em out pretty fast. Whatta you think this is, a piecework town?"

High-Pockets looked chastened, but said nothing.

He went to the copy desk. There was nothing now but want ads. He got a take and then he had a bright idea. He put the want ads on the copy board and went for a drink of water. He was dry again, anyway.

He took plenty of time, and then came back and confidently picked up a take slug.

But he got a jolt when he looked at the stick. It was empty.

High-Pockets nodded wisely. "So it doesn't like want ads any better than anybody else," he said to himself. "Now, that's a dirty shame."

He got all folded in and started to operate. But at the first letter he touched, the keyboard belt broke. He called Arturius and had it fixed, and tried again. The mats jammed up in the chute.

He cleaned them out and then started carefully hitting one letter at a time. But the very first one came to the starwheel, and rang the bell again. "Star-wheel spring is loose," he said. "She won't bring the mats down."

Arturius looked at him with a scowl that bore the heavy responsibility of the entire world, and then without a word sat down to fix it. He stood by while High-Pockets tried again. The line finally was filled and High-Pockets sent it in and started on the second line.

"Wait a minute," said Arturius. "You didn't get a slug." He opened the vise. "Short-line stop is out of adjustment," he growled. "What's the matter with this machine, anyway?"

High-Pockets looked worried. "Maybe she don't like want ads," he said. "Maybe I better set this take somewhere else."

Arturius grunted. High-Pockets went to No. 8. He set the want ads with one eye on No. 7. He was quite sober now.

THE copy cutter wasn't looking when High-Pockets got back to the desk, and High-Pockets did something he'd never done before in his life. He "worked the hook"—instead of taking want ads, he very quietly took a piece of minion, and then looked around guiltily to see if anybody noticed.

He wound his way back to No. 7 and got all set. Arturius was gone. High-Pockets by now realized that he was up against worthy opposition. If he *had* reached No. 7's soul, he had stirred it the wrong way. From now on he would be extremely careful.

Things went all right until after the cast. The line went up to transfer—and there it stuck. High-Pockets sighed and rang the bell. Arturius came, but the scowl on his face was diluted with self-satisfaction.

He started to lock the spaceband lever, but when he touched the latch, the spaceband lever went over with a crash and the line of mats spilled out in the intermediate channel.

High-Pockets sighed noisily and got up. Arturius was using some uncomplimentary language, and the gleam of satisfaction was all in High-Pockets' eyes now.

They picked up the mats, and Arturius pulled out the clutch lever

to let the machine finish its revolution. But it stuck on ejection. The clutch grabbed and chattered. He threw the clutch lever in and went around behind. He backed the machine by hand and hammered with the ejector lever. The slug wouldn't come out.

He came back, looked at the knife, looked at the ejector blade, examined the mouthpiece. "This mill is nuts," he said in his sourest tone, and added some explanatory remarks that verged on redundancy. He held up the ejector lug while High-Pockets pulled the clutch lever and let the machine go on over.

Arturius had to loosen the mold-cap to get the slug out. Then he stood back for High-Pockets to sit down. But by this time High-Pockets had awakened. He looked hard at the copy and whispered to himself, "Oh-oh, no wonder. We've got society. Don't blame her." He told Arturius he had to get a drink. When he came back, Arturius was gone, and very quietly High-Pockets went over to No. 8 and set the type.

His next take was a nice piece of telegraph on green copy paper. "She ought to like this," High-Pockets thought, but his face had a wondering look.

He put the copy in the holder and got ready to massage the keyboard. But he'd just got his arms folded up and his fingers stretched out when the mats began to drop into the assembling elevator. They drop-

ped with perfect timing. The assembling elevator filled and High-Pockets' eyes began to gleam. "She'll have to wait for me to send the line in," he thought. But old No. 7 wouldn't be denied. The elevator went up, the line went in, the elevator came down, and mats started dropping again. High-Pockets got up and went to a window. He leaned out and breathed the crisp night air.

When he got back the take was finished.

He got the second take of the same story and went back to the machine. He put the take in the copy holder and then, out of habit, he looked at the stick. It was already half full of type. He was almost afraid to compare it with his copy, but he did.

After he checked it, he got up and went to the locker room. Nobody else was there. He pulled the pint bottle out of his coat pocket and without hesitation violated another strict office rule—he took a good, long, healthy drink of bourbon.

He wiped his lips and came back. No. 7 was still running over. He looked at the type. There was a guideline that said "Third Add — Nazi Werewolves." High-Pockets turned on his heel and went back to the locker room. This time he had two drinks, and when he finished he weaved a little more.

"Monkeying with souls," he muttered, "is dangerous business."

HE was thankful the story had only three takes. First he thought he would dump the third take in the metal pot, but when he picked it up it was so hot that even he, with calloused finger-tips from handling hot slugs for twenty years, couldn't hold it. So he dumped both takes and turned off the motor, then went to lunch.

That is, he borrowed a dollar from the chairman and started for the restaurant. But he passed a saloon on the way, and decided he was more in need of a drink.

When he got back he had a little trouble with the fluorescent lights. They weaved when he weaved, and it took some rather delicate navigation to beat them to the punch. It was fortunate that the light tubes were fixed securely in their sockets, and fortunate that the foreman had gone into the office to check the time cards.

When High-Pockets got back to the copy desk, he was pretty fuzzy around the edges. He looked over his first take as soon as he got behind the desk. Then he gave a relieved sigh. This was Editorial. No. 7 wouldn't be so fussy—he hoped.

He got four paragraphs through before he ran into trouble. Then some mats jammed up at the top of the assembler entrance cover. High-Pockets started to ring the bell, but decided not to. He could dig it out himself. He'd had enough trouble with Arturius for one night.

He opened the entrance cover,

and a hundred mats fell down over his arm and onto the keyboard with an ominous tinkle. Their weight depressed some twenty keys, and the power drive immediately began to function, and the mats from those twenty channels dropped in twenty curving streams on the keyboard, which depressed still more keys and made more mats drop, and in about two minutes No. 7 had poured fifteen hundred mats into High-Pockets' lap.

He did one thing before he rang the bell. He brushed the mats off the copy holder and looked at the rest of the paragraph. It ended, “—and the blame for Pearl Harbor thus lay at the door of the White House.”

High-Pockets got up, shedding mats by the hundreds. Arturius came, looking as if he were about to detonate. Half the operators in the shop were there to enjoy the fact that at least there was one man who wasn't afraid to have trouble with No. 7.

Somebody chuckled and said, “Get a basket,” but High-Pockets knew it wasn't meant for him, and nobly disdained a reply. He was muttering to himself, “I've heard these machines called a lot of things in my time, but this is the first one I ever saw that could justifiably be called a Republican.”

The machinist was verbose, a little on the vicariously obscene side. High-Pockets helped him pick the mats off the floor, but it was al-

most an hour before they got the machine going again.

When they did, High-Pockets went back to look at the slip-board. He studied it for a few minutes with a queer look on his face, then started for the chairman. But halfway there, he changed his mind. No machine had ever got the best of him before, and he'd been up against some tough ones. He was a barnstormer, wasn't he?

So he went back to the battle. But now there wasn't any copy, so he wandered around with that queer look on his face, and finally wound up in the locker room where he decided he might as well kill the pint. He smoked a cigarette and stuck his head out of the window into the fresh air. -

WHEN the pint was thoroughly defunct he returned. The machine was quiet again, but the stick was half full. He didn't even look at it. There wasn't any copy, but he took the type to the dump.

The next take was copy for "Good Morning, Glory," the paper's star columnist. That seemed to go very well. No. 7 perhaps couldn't quite make out what was happening. Well, that was nothing. Most columnists were like that.

Then again there wasn't any copy. A young fellow came down from the newsroom and spoke to the copy-cutter. "There'll be a story down for the eleven-fifteen edition," he said. "Two Women Murdered."

About a column."

The copy-cutter looked at the clock. "It's eleven o'clock now," he said. "Where is it?"

"Just starting to write it upstairs. We'll get it down as fast as we can."

The copy-cutter grumbled. "Better have a make-over, then. We won't have time to handle it."

But High-Pockets knew better. He poked his head over the desk and sneaked a look at No. 7. She was grinding away. High-Pockets went back to the dump and looked at the guideline of his stickful without copy. It said, "Two Women Murdered."

But nobody would ever give out a long take like that so near closing time. He looked again. He should have known. The half-a-stickful was divided into thirds, carefully guided "First Add" and "Second Add", and at the bottom of the last add was a turned slug and a line, "More to Come."

The copy tube swished, and a carrier thumped in the box. "Here," the copy cutter said, "here's a prelude on that atomic bomb explosion. You might as well set that while we're waiting."

"Okay," said High-Pockets, and in the now hazy recesses of his mind he made a mighty resolution: he would set this take himself; No. 7 be damned.

He went straight to the machine. Mats were dropping, but High-Pockets just raised his eyebrows and reached up and turned off the pow-

er. That would stop her.

He got his copy all fixed and his arms folded in, and then he unfolded one arm and turned on the power while his right hand hovered over the keyboard. Apparently No. 7 didn't quite know what to make of this new attack, and he was able to get several lines through before she figured it out. Then she seemed to sit back and get her breath, and High-Pockets, with a wide grin on his face, manipulated the keyboard fast enough to keep the machine hung so she wouldn't get a chance on her own hook.

But eventually he had a pileup of mats and had to miss a line. He was crestfallen. But strangely enough, she didn't start in when he got the assembling elevator clear. He watched her out of the corner of his eye while he gingerly assembled the line, but nothing happened. He sent that line in and watched it go through without any disturbance, then he sat back a moment and he and the machine sized each other up. Still no mats dropped of their own volition. High-Pockets grinned. Maybe he was beginning to sober up.

He set a line and sent it in, watching. It justified and the pot came forward to cast. "Hmp," said High-Pockets. "Who said she's human? Sub-human, I call it."

Something happened when he said that. The second justification lever went up with a bang that shook the whole machine, and High-

Pockets reached for the clutch lever with his left hand.

But he was so long he had to grab something with his right hand to balance, and just then the line delivery came back with a snap and smashed his right thumb.

"Ouch!" said High-Pockets, and jumped up and then he swore and shook his hand.

A minute later he sat down again with a determined gleam in his eyes. He tightened the vise-locking screws and leaned over to look at the line, down in the jaws, to be sure the mats were in alignment before he pulled the clutch. And just then the right hand locking stud came loose with a snap and spun clockwise, and the cross-handle cracked him on the chin.

High-Pockets took it like a man. He didn't even swear this time. He got out of his chair. "I *will* see if that line is all right," he muttered "If I don't—"

HE tightened the screw, then he got his head in under the intermediate bar to look. And at that moment a gust of air blew a cloud of graphite out of the intermediate channel and filled his right eye. He was nearly blinded, but he didn't ask for help. Very quietly he wound his way to the washroom. He cleaned his face and worked the graphite out of his eye as well as he could, and then, with a determined look on his face, went back.

Arturius reached the machine

about the same time he did, "What did you leave her on the cast for?" he barked.

High-Pockets didn't answer.

Arturius indulged in some choice blasphemy with its direction divided equally between High-Pockets and No. 7. High-Pockets felt sorry for Arturius. He went to the locker room and determined to his satisfaction that the pint was still dead, then he came back. The boy had left some proofs on his machine. High-Pockets picked them up to scan them. Then he swore vigorously. "Proofreaders!" he sputtered. "Comma chasers! Look at this!" he invited the world. "Put a hyphen in the word *good-will*. Marked a double *e* in *employe*. Changed *thous-and* to *thou-sand*!" He clenched his fists and raised them far above his head. "Give me strength!" he groaned. "Give me strength! On top of everything else, the proofreaders have to go nuts too."

He started for the proof room, clutching the proofs in one hand. His long arms swung as he weaved among the lights. He went in the door of the proof room and stood there a moment. His head was above the lights and for a moment he couldn't see very clearly, but he demanded in his booming voice: "Who signed these proofs 'R. M. S.'?"

There was a stir in the proofroom, and then a man at the far end of the table got to his feet. "I did,"

he said in thunderous voice.

High-Pockets didn't back down. "What the hell do you think this is—1910?" he demanded, waving the proofs. "This is a newspaper, isn't it, not a dictionary?"

"Is it indeed?" said the man ominously, and High-Pockets thought he had heard that voice before. He stared toward the man and his eyes began to focus and then he saw who it was. A gulp started in High-Pockets' adam's-apple and traveled visibly down the full length of his body to the floor. He opened his mouth but no sound came out. His eyes became glazed like those of a man walking in his sleep.

"Your honor," he said, at last, struggling to force words from his larynx and looking like a man in a very blue funk, "there are extenuating circumstances."

Then he seemed to awaken. He looked around him. Through the glass windows of the proof room he saw a makeup man pushing a turtle to the stereotype room, and this seemed to give him a little grip on reality. He turned back with a certain air of assurance, as if he was about to take things decisively into his own hands. But he looked into His Honor's stern countenance and that assurance wilted visibly. High-Pockets retreated in confusion.

Maybe No. 7 sympathized with him. At least she allowed him to correct the proofs without any trouble. High-Pockets even began to

feel that there was some feeling of friendliness flowing between them.

He was working on his next take when he felt a presence behind him. He revolved in his chair, and he very nearly fell over when he once again faced His Honor, the Judge. His Honor had a long piece of pasted copy in one hand and was waving a proof in the other. "So," His Honor said malevolently, "you're the poet."

"What are you talking about?"

"This." His Honor waved the proof under High-Pockets' nose. "You set this verse. It isn't in the copy at all."

High-Pockets felt uneasy. "Let's see." He read aloud:

*"'Tis down in the woods. A
gentleman slumbers*

*Beneath the protection of wild
cucumbers.*

*The woodpeckers woodpeck, the
rattlesnakes rattle,*

*And all the cockroaches prepare
to do battle."*

HIGH-POCKETS gulped. He handed the proof back to His Honor: he revolved again and folded himself into the chair. He started to set type. Then he remembered. "Your Honor," he said, "I had nothing to do with it. No. 7 did it."

His Honor, goaded by High-Pockets' temporary amnesia which looked very much like disrespect, exploded. "A machine! A machine did this?"

High-Pockets sent in the line and

started another.

"Are you imputing intelligence to a machine?" His Honor demanded, and No. 7 seemed to hesitate for an instant. "No machine on earth could compose such awful poetry as this," His Honor thundered.

No. 7 was casting. For no reason at all the plunger stuck in the bottom of the well and No. 7's clutch chattered and shook the entire machine before High-Pockets shut off the power. High-Pockets revolved and looked at the judge and raised his eyebrows, then rang the bell.

This time the machinist was entirely speechless. High-Pockets pointed to the plunger. Arturius worked on it but couldn't get it loose. He got a Crescent wrench. "Get hold of the first-elevator cam," he said, "and back her up while I twist the plunger."

His Honor stood by, waiting to take up the battle with High-Pockets.

High-Pockets got hold of the cam with a sardonic set to his lips. He yanked hard. No. 7 would find out who was boss.

But when he pulled, the screw holding the end of the second elevator starting spring came loose and the spring shot the screw into High-Pockets' ribs with the force of a bullet. High-Pockets merely grunted.

"Wait, I'll take the drive clutch," Arturius said, as if he was beginning to be concerned.

High-Pockets shut off the power, and Arturius took hold of the clutch, one hand on each end, and turned forward.

The plunger started to lift. It came halfway up, and then the machine suddenly rolled backward again, with the heavy plunger spring helping it. The clutch spun like a top.

Arturius backed away holding the fingers of one hand.

"Get hurt?"

Arturius bit his lip. "No," he said, "but pull that plunger pin before I try it again."

High-Pockets pulled the pin, and Arturius got No. 7 off the cast. Then he went around to the front, took the controlling lever, and started to pull it out to finish the machine's revolution.

He saw a loose mat on the vise and reached for it with his left hand. At that instant his hand slipped off the controlling lever, and the first elevator head came down with a crash.

But Arturius' fingers were not there. He backed off and did the most thoroughly human thing he'd done in years. He thumbed his nose at No. 7. The judge looked skeptical.

"Look out!" High-Pockets yelled. "She's backing!"

His long arms moved with astonishing speed. He practically snatched the judge up from the place where he stood and set him down again two feet away. And

just in time, for a stream of silvery, molten metal rose in a wide arc from the vise-jaws of No. 7 and came down exactly where His Honor's bald head had been. About three pounds of it descended to the floor and lay there hardening and smoking like an over-done pancake.

Sweat popped out on the judge's bald head. His Honor's eyes were bulging. "She squirted hot lead at me!" he said accusingly. "Maliciously and with malice aforethought." He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his bald head. His hands were steady. "If that lead had fallen on me," he said plaintively, "it would have baked my skull. Why did she try to do that to me?"

"You made fun of her poetry," High-Pockets pointed out. With a certain amount of pleasure he reflected that His Honor could hardly allege contempt, under the circumstances.

But his honor looked at High-Pockets with a new light in his eyes. "You may have saved my life," he said thoughtfully.

Arturius Wickware looked desperate. "It can't squirt," he said. "The plunger pin isn't in."

High-Pockets pointed to the metal on the floor. "It did," he said.

ARTURIUS looked at No. 7 dourly and shut off the motor. "Please take No. 8," he begged High-Pockets. It was the first time

he had said "please" in thirty years.

High-Pockets was staring at the proof like a man in a trance.

Suddenly he made half a dozen long strides to the machinist's bench. He laid hands on a twelve-pound sledge-hammer. He came back with it over his shoulder, and before the horrified Arturius could utter a word, High-Pockets had gone to the rear of No. 7 and swung the sledge in one devastating left-handed blow that sheared through the ninth and tenth cams. Then he stepped to the right and crashed the hammer down on the pot-pump cam.

He stepped back, breathing hard, the hammer over his shoulder. Pieces of cast iron tinkled to the floor. "Well," boomed High-Pockets, "I guess I fixed it, didn't I?"

There was no answer. High-Pockets looked around. Arturius had quietly fainted. The judge looked horrified.

They revived Arturius by the simple expedient of putting a screw-driver in his big hand. He opened his eyes and stared at High-Pockets and shook his head slowly, incredulously.

High-Pockets helped him up. "Don't worry," he said.

Arturius sputtered and almost detonated. "Don't worry!" he snorted. "Five hundred dollars worth of cams busted up and he says, 'Don't worry!'"

"It won't cost that much," said High-Pockets. "I'll help you piece

the cams together. You can get them welded."

"No," said Arturius. "I'll get new ones."

"It won't work," said High-Pockets.

"What won't work?"

"I did that to chastise the machine. If it wants to be so independent, it will have to endure the penalties as well as enjoy the privileges. If you put in new cams, it will think it's smart and go right ahead raising hell. But if you have the old ones welded and put back in, the welds, like scars, will remind No. 7 that she's supposed to be a lady. As long as they are there, No. 7 will behave. I guarantee it."

The judge wiped his bald head again. "I do believe you've got something there, Mr. Jones. If a machine assumes the right of self-determination, what would be more natural than to treat it as you would treat any other self-determining creature?"

High-Pockets heaved a tremendous sigh of relief. He saw now that his stay in the city would not be terminated as a guest in the workhouse. High-Pockets was very happy indeed.

"How can you be sure?" Arturius demanded.

"I'll show you," said High-Pockets. "Turn on the motor."

Arturius did. A strange thing happened. No. 7 began to turn. She pulled herself off of the cast.

Somehow she broke loose the hardened metal on her vise jaws. It dropped to the floor in one big piece. She came to a normal stop and stood there obediently.

"That's utterly impossible!" Arturius shouted. "It can't even turn over—with those cams broken out."

"She's chastened," High-Pockets said gently. "All you have to do from now on is to be firm."

The judge came closer. "Mr. Jones," he said, "I am beginning to believe that even a linotype operator has a place in this modern world. Suppose we all three go out and have a drink."

High-Pockets turned off the motor. "I heard you the first time, Your Honor, and I am happy to report that there are no extenuating circumstances. Shall we go?"

THE END

★ *The Lagging Helicopter* ★

EVERYBODY accepts the implied fact that the future of transportation lies in the air. And with the spreading out of cities into vast suburban areas it appears that there will soon be an unprecedented demand for moderate distance transportation. Right now the automobile fills the bill. But it wasn't so long ago that the aviation enthusiasts were telling us that the light plane would soon be as common as the car.

This prediction hasn't materialized and the reasons are clear. A plane is a crude machine, requiring lots of fuel, lots of care, a big landing space, considerable skill to operate and it's fundamentally costly.

Therefore the airplane is simply not the answer to the needs of the future. And since anti-gravity devices seem to be of the same order as squaring the circle, it looks like we'll have to think of something else.

Actually the transportation problem has been solved. Practical operating helicopters do exist! The question that bothers us is this: why hasn't a cheap effective helicopter

been made popular?

The rotary blades of a helicopter, providing absolute safety, ease of operation, and convenience, make straight up-and-down flight possible. Yet the helicopter can travel at high speeds forward and backwards. Nothing is as easily maneuverable.

It is about time that the engineers and manufacturers of helicopters get on the proverbial ball and start a powerful campaign to get these inevitable machines into action. They're coming, we know that. But why not now?

The military and naval authorities are putting them to all sorts of uses. Rescue teams, doctors and others who must work in isolated areas find them invaluable. Of course they cost money, but that's mainly because they haven't been mass produced.

The time is coming, and it's not far off, when the need for helicopters is going to make the builders sit up and take notice. Let's get into the act now. These versatile machines will occupy the same position the family car does now.

High Altitude — 1870!

HIGH altitude physiological research is important today. It has formed the groundwork on which the science of "space medicine" is based, but it is by no means a new idea. Biological research on high altitudes dates back to the 1870's when the science was founded by Paul Bert, a French physiologist who might be called the father of aerial medicine.

This ingenious experimenter spent most of his life determining the effects of air pressure and aerial conditions in general upon organisms—including human beings. His famous treatise on "Barometric Pressure" remained for a long time the Bible of high altitude research.

He discovered in particular one very important fact which may greatly influence some day, whether or not Man will be able to colonize a planet! This is the fact that men are able to breathe in and survive in greatly reduced air pressures so long as the pressure of the oxygen in that reduced air is at least one-third to one-fifth the original pressure. Consequently men can breathe pure oxygen at pressures as low as one-fifth of atmospheric.

Paul Bert was not a theoretician. He believed in putting his ideas to the test, and one of his famous balloon flights—conducted by volunteers naturally!—became the initial high altitude attempt.

In 1874, after the Franco-Prussian war, Bert arranged a balloon ascension with three technicians carrying with them for the first time, bottled oxygen! Their instructions were to record exactly the physiological sen-

sations they experienced with increasing altitude, and eventually to take the oxygen when they felt the need.

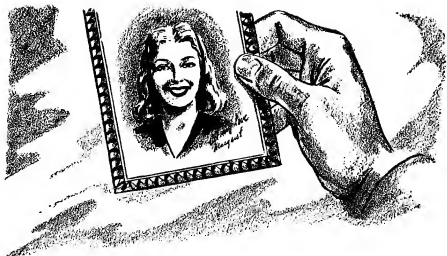
The flight started out inauspiciously because shortly after the balloon arose, two of the three men began taking some of the oxygen—a play which was to prove fatal. Ballast was dropped and the balloon arose rapidly. The balloon reached the altitude of twenty-six thousand feet, and the men breathed oxygen through the crudely constructed masks they wore. They noted their sensations of dizziness, lack of clear-headedness, and the general lassitude they felt.

Two of the men became unconscious and the balloon started to drop down after attaining its maximum height of 27,000 feet. But it dropped much too slowly, and the oxygen had run out. Fortunately one experimenter remained alert and was able to release the gas valve. This saved his life. The other two men died.

This tragic flight however demonstrated the value of breathing oxygen at high altitudes and had sufficient of the life-giving gas been carried no tragedy would have ensued.

Paul Bert conducted other experiments of a similar nature, laying the foundations of what was eventually to become the necessary science of high altitude physiology. Bert received many awards and even today his name is referred to in technical publications. What would he think of today's fantastic progress if he could come back . . . ?





SO MANY WORLDS AWAY...

By

Dwight V. Swain

Horning's married life was unbearable so he sought peace in another dimension. But was his past somehow linked with other worlds? . . .

IT was nearly four o'clock in the windowless basement laboratory when Horning screwed tight the last connection.

He straightened, shrugged the kinks from his back and shoulders, and wiped his hands clean on a wad of waste. Crossing to the battered desk in the corner, he pushed back Margaret's picture, got out pen and paper, and wrote briefly:

Dear Myrtle,

It's time we faced facts. I never should have married you after Margaret died. My work means everything to me; I can't give it up. But you detest the whole business of being a scientist's wife. Knowing how you feel about the "shame" of divorce, I won't ask you to let me leave you legally. There's a better way out. By the time you read this,

I'll either have breached and bridged the space-time continuum to another plane, or I'll be dead. In either case, you'll be happier with me gone. My patent royalties and insurance will take care of you as long as you live.

Good luck, and I'm sorry it didn't work out.

Raymond.

Horning weighted the letter down in the center of the desk. Then, pushing back his chair, he picked up Margaret's picture.

She smiled up at him as always, so real the sight of her brought a tightness to his throat. When he closed his eyes, he could almost hear her voice, rippling with gay, gentle laughter. He felt her lips on his . . . her dark, silken hair against his cheek.

Only Margaret had lain in her grave for three years now . . .

Horning drew a quick, shallow breath. Sliding the photo from its frame, he tucked it into the breast pocket of his shirt.

Back at the workbench, he heaved up the bulky transdimensional registration unit, strapped it on and adjusted the scanning scope to the proper angle against his chest. Dial by dial, circuit by circuit, he checked the light-loop's control panel.

Everything was ready.

This was the moment he'd worked for . . . the great gamble, the final test. Not even Myrtle could stop

him now.

Palm slick with sweat, he gripped the master switch and shoved it shut.

Purple light flared in the tubes set in the light-loop's door-like metal frame. The blank wall behind it took on the familiar translucent glow.

Horning opened the intensifier channels and increased the alpha and gamma readings.

The light turned silver. The wall behind the framework disappeared.

HORNING stepped onto the ramp that led up to the frame. In the humming stillness he could hear the sound of his own heartbeat, drumming faster and faster. The sharp, chlorine-like smell of ozone filled the air.

For an instant, then, he hesitated, acutely conscious of an uncontrollable trembling. Sweat drenched him; the sour stench of it cut through the ozone.

He thought: *Maybe they're right. Maybe I'm crazy to think I can cross the barrier between the worlds.*

Upstairs, the front door slammed. The house echoed with the thud of heavy footsteps.

Myrtle's footsteps—!

Horning sucked in one final, desperate breath and stepped through the light-loop's frame.

It was so simple, really. Just like going out a doorway, into a limitless expanse of shining silver plain. He felt no pain, no shock, not even

slight discomfort.

Swiftly, skillfully, he adjusted the transdimensional registration unit's dials.

Light flickered on the scanning scope's screen, a shapeless blur.

Horning twisted the focussing knob. The blur resolved. A scene took form.

Taut with excitement, Horning stared for the first time into another world.

The place was an apartment, he decided. But what an apartment! It shimmered like a modernist's sparkling dream. The decor was brilliant, unique in style. Metal and plastic combined in sleek, functional forms.

Nor was this all. A man stood by a table, back to the screen, mixing a drink. While Horning watched, he restoppered the bottle and stepped out a door to the right.

Horning frowned. He had a strange feeling, somehow, that he'd seen the man somewhere before.

Shrugging it off, he lined up the crosshairs on the screen with infinite care and switched the projector drive to high.

Before his very eyes, the shining silver plain dissolved. The shadowy walls of the room on the screen rose about him. Furnishings appeared in misty outline.

Horning pressed the reintegrator button.

The walls lost their shadow. The furnishings took on solid form.

Horning came to rest with a heavy thud, sprawled in the center of the floor.

Behind him, there was a stir of sudden movement; a choked exclamation.

Before he could turn or regain his feet, a man's tight voice clipped, "Don't move—or you die!"

Horning froze. "There's no need to be frightened," he said quickly. "I'm merely a—a traveler. I've come here from another plane—"

"I understand perfectly!" the voice snapped back. "I happen to be an authority on such matters. That's why I say—if you move, you die!"

Horning's spine prickled. Just as he'd had the feeling he'd seen the man on the screen before, now it came to him that the voice, too, was strangely familiar.

BEHIND him, shoes scraped the floor. Fingers probed warily at his pockets, his belt, his armpits. Then they went away again and the voice said, "All right. Now take off that outfit."

Wordless, wooden-fingered, Horning unstrapped the transdimensional registration unit's harness.

"Get up!" the voice commanded.

Horning obeyed.

"Now sit down on that lounge in front of you, with your hands on the arms."

Horning crossed to the divan and turned around. For the first time, he faced his captor.

It was the same man Horning had seen on the screen. He stood poised, cat-footed, back against the gleaming metaloid wall. An ugly, snub-nosed pistol of strange design was in his hand.

And his face was Horning's face.

Horning went rigid—shocked, half unbelieving.

"Down!" rapped his counterpart.

Horning sank numbly to the seat.

"Who are you? Why did you come here?"

Some of the numbness left Horning. Cold anger came in its place. "Why ask me?" he lashed back. (I thought you knew all the answers.)

The man's knuckles whitened on the pistol. "I want the truth!"

Horning laughed. Of a sudden he felt bold and reckless. "I told you the first time. I came from another world, a different plane—"

The gun moved in a flat, incisive gesture. "I know all that! The parallel worlds, the Worlds of 'If'. Parmenides and his theory of the Eternal Now. The idea that life's a book with an infinity of pages; that every event automatically creates coexisting planes, one for each possible outcome—" Horning's captor broke off. "But *why*? What drove you to cross the barrier?"

Horning shrugged. "It was Myrtle—" he began wryly.

The other started; fell back a step. "Myrtle—?"

"My wife. I wanted to leave her."

"You mean—you breached the con-

tinuum for no better reason . . .?"

Horning laughed curtly. "For my part, I found it a very adequate reason."

For a long moment the other stared at him. Then, abruptly, he, too, laughed. The snub-nosed gun's muzzle lowered.

"You amaze me," his captor chuckled. He bowed. "Permit me to introduce myself. I'm Doctor Raymond X. Horning."

"My coexisting counterpart on this plane—?"

"Of course. The alter ego is bound to serve as a focal point when you cross the barrier." The man pocketed his gun and walked over to the table. "Let me mix you a drink. After such an experience, you need a pickup."

HORNING leaned back, studying the other obliquely and trying to fathom the sudden change in his attitude.

Too, he still marveled at the similarity between them. They were so alike they could pass as twins, he decided. Identical twins. The only difference between them lay in details of expression — the sardonic twist to the other's mouth; the chill, penetrating gleam in the deep-set eyes.

His counterpart handed him a glass. "You amuze me, my friend. But I'm afraid you don't realize the full implications of what you've done."

"Such as—?" Horning queried,

sipping at the drink and finding it good.

"Such as the fact that interdimensional transit is not only a logical impossibility, but a very practical menace."

Horning frowned. "Why?"

"Because it puts two identical personalities on one plane." The man with Horning's face dropped into a chair and hunched forward. "Take our own situation as an example. You're married to a shrew, a termagant. You want to leave her."

"Yes."

"I, on the other hand, have a young and charming wife who holds a considerable fortune in her own right. Consequently, it would be ever so much to your advantage to switch places with me." Horning's counterpart brought up one square-knit hand in an expressive gesture. "What's to prevent your murdering me and moving in?"

Horning nodded slowly. "I see what you mean."

"I'm convinced it's actually happened a few times already," the other asserted. "Though of course it's not generally known. Fortunately, we've never worked out the principle on this plane." He paused to drink, then set down his glass. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he nodded in the direction of the transdimensional registration unit. "Just how does it work, Doctor? I've always wondered where my own experiments went wrong."

For a moment Horning hesitated,

then shrugged. "See for yourself." Kneeling, he unsnapped the unit's back plate and exposed the circuits. "The registration dials are set with my own world as zero. You pick up others in the scanning scope as you go, within the limits of the projector drive. After that, it's just a problem of reintegration."

Beside him, the man who was his coexisting self craned. "So that's it! I never dreamed it could be so simple."

"I used a light-loop to help break through the barrier," Horning explained, sketching out a hasty diagram. "It helps to increase the power output—"

"Of course." The other was down on the floor now, probing into the unit's workings. "I've developed all the component elements at one time or another, but when it came to combining them properly, I always managed to miss out."

HORNING rose and drained his glass. "Well, you know now," he observed. "For my part, I'm ready to start work on some other project, now that I've gotten to this world."

"I was afraid you'd say that," the other Doctor Raymond X. Horning remarked. Straightening, he snapped shut the back panel of the transdirectional registration unit. "But . . . it's not easy."

"What do you mean?"

Horning's counterpart got up. "I mean you can't stay in this

world. You're going to have to leave again."

"To, leave—I!" Horning turned sharply.

"Yes." Beneath the blandness of the other's manner, a new note rang, grim and unyielding. "As I pointed out, interdimensional transit's a logical impossibility. There's no way of integrating two identical personalities, two selves of the same man, into a highly organized society such as this one."

"And for a reason like that you'd try to force me out—?" Horning took an angry step forward.

But his counterpart jumped back, out of the way. His hand darted to his pocket, whipping out the snub-nosed pistol.

Horning came to an abrupt halt.

The blandness was gone from the other's face now. The deep-set eyes were cold, the sardonic lines set.

He said: "There's another reason, Doctor. I like my life; I like my wife. And I'm afraid the temptation to relieve me of both might prove too great for you."

"You're being absurd," Horning snapped. "Not to mention insulting."

"Am I?" His counterpart smiled thinly. "I doubt that, my friend. You see, we're one, really. Though we live on separate planes, we both feel the same drives, the same tensions, the same impulses."

"You're talking nonsense!"

"No nonsense, Doctor." The pis-

tol in his counterpart's hand was very steady. "Given the proper pressure, a strong enough motive, I know that even I could kill. In your situation, I'd certainly feel justified in murdering you. So I have no intention of giving you the chance to make me your victim."

"So—?" snapped Horning.

"So, you're going to leave now," his coexisting self answered bluntly. "You can be thankful I'll even let you go alive." He gestured with the pistol. "Strap on your unit. And be assured I'll have no hesitancy about shooting you if I have to."

Horning clenched his fists, caught up in a churning sea of fury. "So help me—I!"

The gun centered on his belly. "I'll give you till I count ten," his counterpart clipped tightly.

Horning bit down hard. Pivoting, he hoisted the transdimensional registration unit from the floor and strapped it into position.

"In case you have any foolish ideas of coming back, let me warn you that I intend to set up a force barrier around this place," the man with his face observed with grim malice. "If you try to breach it, I'll kill you on sight."

Wordless, still seething, Horning switched the projector drive to reverse.

The room grew shadowy about him. His counterpart faded.

Horning pressed the disintegrator button.

OF a sudden, room and counter-part were gone. Once more Horning stood alone in the vastness of the shining silver plain. His head throbbed dully; he felt incredibly tired and drained.

For a moment he almost considered going back to his own world . . . back to Myrtle.

But nightmare memories of the empty, bitter life they'd led rose up to steel him, all hatred, conflict, tension . . . so different from the happiness of the other days, the days with Margaret.

Margaret . . . He touched her picture, still safe in his pocket.

There were other worlds—an infinity of them. Somewhere, sometime, he'd find the one world he sought.

Again, he turned the transdimensional registration unit's dials.

Light flashed on the scanning scope's screen. Stiff-fingered, Horning focussed.

Here the scene was one of bleak desolations, painted in a hundred drab shades of grey. A murky sky pressed down on sullen hills, thick underfoot with powdery, ash-dry dust. Seared shafts that might once have been trees thrust up here and there like skeletal fingers. In the foreground rose the crumbling corner of a ruined building, base buried deep in rubble.

A man crouched there — ragged, bone-gaunt, grey as the shattered walls at his back. He clutched a

club in one claw-like hand, and the strain of utter panic, despair, stood out in every taut, harsh-drawn line.

Before the man, hemming him in, ranged a dozen great, six-legged, wolfish beasts of a fearsome genus Horning had never seen before. Snarling, slaving, they crowded in closer and closer, huge fangs bared.

With a chill of horror, Horning flipped the magnifier across the scanning scope's screen.

The beleaguered man's face leaped up at him, sharp and clear.

"No—!" Horning choked. "No!"

For the other's fear-blanching face was his face, too . . . the face of another coexisting self, doomed to live and die in this grey, desolate world.

Even as Horning cried out, one of the great wolf-things sprang.

The man jerked back and lashed out with his club. The beast fell short, battered down.

But in the same instant, another of the creatures lunged, from the other side. Its hideous, slashing fangs closed on the man's club arm.

The impact bore the man to his knees. Before he could recover, a third of the wolf-things was at his throat. Blood gushed, a sharp scarlet accent in a world of grey.

Horning squeezed his eyes tight shut in a frenzied effort to shut out the horror. Spasmodically, he spun the transdimensional registration unit's dials.

Again there was a flicker of light. Hands still atremble, Horning focused on it.

A new world came alive before him.

THIS time, the scene was laid in what appeared to be a cheap cafe. A throng of loungers lined the bar set against the far wall. But their shabby clothes were of a cut and material unknown to Horning. The grimed, poorly-executed murals struck a note of jangling discord, as if even the arts here were keyed to a different plane.

In the foreground, a man gone flabby with fat slumped on his arms at a table, a bottle half full of greenish liquor before him.

A sudden commotion stirred at the far end of the room. The loungers milled and drew back.

Four men in sack-like purple uniforms pushed through the crowd with cold arrogance. Their features had an oriental cast, and they carried drawn swords of strange design.

The first of the quartet came abreast the table in the foreground. Stepping aside, he gestured contemptuously towards the man slumped there.

The other three troopers swaggered up and jerked the man bodily from his chair.

For the first time. Horning saw the sodden man's face.

Again, as in the other worlds,

it was his own.

Now, the fat man shook his head blearily, as if trying to blink the haze of drink from his eyes.

The leader of the four uniformed men slapped him savagely, first on one side of the face and then the other.

Horning's coexisting self sagged to his knees.

The leader of the men in purple kicked him in the stomach.

Horning's counterpart vomited.

The men in purple laughed and threw their prisoner down at full length on the floor with all their might. Then, catching him by the feet, they dragged him bodily out of both drinking house and range of the scanning scope's screen.

Shuddering, Horning stared off across the shining silver plain. Of a sudden he had no heart for searching through other worlds; knew that he would not have till time had dimmed the memory of this day.

It left him no choice but to go back to his own plane . . . back to Myrtle.

And if she'd found his note . . . He shook his head in wry dismay.

But he had no other course left open. Carefully, he turned the trans-dimensional registration unit's calibrated dials back to zero . . . manipulated the controls.

The light-loop's tubes blazed and pulsated on the scanner screen, so bright they obscured everything beyond. The frame materialized before

him, rising like a shimmering, translucent gateway amid the empty vastness of the silver plain.

HEAVY-FOOTED, heavy-hearted, Horning stepped through it, back to the basement laboratory that lay in his own world.

And there was Myrtle. Head thrust forward, one thick arm beligerently akimbo, she stood by the desk, reading Horning's note.

Horning stopped short.

Myrtle's glance flicked to him. Her eyes, black and beady, drew to fury-glinting, fat-rimmed slits.

Horning stumbled from the ramp, fumbling at the transit unit's harness.

But Myrtle was upon him in three walloping strides—clutching his shirt-front, shoving her face close to his. An aura of cheap perfume, stale face powder, clothes that could have done with more frequent laundering, washed over Horning in unpleasant waves.

"You—!"

She spat the word with such venom that her face shook.

Horning tried to speak, but no words came.

"Leave me, will you—!"

"Myrtle—"

She struck him across the mouth.

Horning's head reeled. He tried to twist free.

But Myrtle's hand was still locked in his shirt-front. Savagely, she jerked him back and hit him

again.

Horning staggered. His shirt ripped. Margaret's portrait fluttered from his pocket to the floor.

Myrtle went rigid. Eyes dilating, she stared at the fallen picture.

Horning tore loose her hand and scooped the photo from the floor.

Teeth bared, nostrils flaring, Myrtle closed in upon him. "So that's it!" she cried shrilly.

"What—?"

"So you thought you'd go back to her, that's what! You figured you'd find her in another world—"

A chill ran up and down Horning's spine. He tucked the picture back in his pocket. "Myrtle, you don't know what you're saying—"

"Oh, don't I?" His wife laughed wildly. Grey hair fell across her forehead in snarled disarray. "Maybe I know more than you think, Doctor Raymond X. Horning! I've read those things you wrote—all that craziness about the other worlds. But I didn't know *why* you wanted to go there till now."

Horning fumbled with the trans-dimensional registration unit's straps. Unslinging the bulky case, he lowered it to the floor. He dared not trust himself to speak.

But Myrtle closed in upon him, clawing at him. "Admit it!" she shrieked. "Go ahead! Tell me to my face you'd rather have that—that slut than me—"

Horning wheeled. His hands shook. "Myrtle, I've taken every

word from you that I intend to," he said tightly. "Get out of my laboratory! Now! This instant!" Myrtle's nails raked at his eyes.

BEFORE he could recover from fending off the blow, she had snatched Margaret's picture from his pocket.

"I'll show you!" she cried, shrill and strident. "I'll let you see what I think of her, the dirty little tramp!"

She spat full in the face of the picture.

Horning hit her.

She lurched back two tottering steps, tripped, and sprawled on the floor.

Horning strode to her, jerked Margaret's photo from her hand, and wiped it clean.

He said: "I'm through. Whether you like it or not, I'm filing for divorce tomorrow."

His wife dragged herself up to a sitting position, her face a mask of hate and cunning.

"Go ahead," she goaded. "Go *right* ahead, Doctor Raymond X. Horning." Her voice rose, took on new and even more bitter overtones of malice. "But . . . just don't blame anyone but yourself for whatever happens to your precious apparatus."

Heaving herself to her feet, she stomped out of the laboratory and off up the basement stairs.

Fists clenched, Horning watched her go. Then, wearily, he crossed to

his ancient desk and dropped down in the chair.

As always, Myrtle had won. The first time he left the house she'd be at work here—breaking down the door, smashing his equipment and his dreams.

And as for Margaret . . . He smoothed her picture. But the features blurred and his eyes began to burn, till at last he pushed the photograph back in his pocket and slumped forward on his arms.

How long he lay there he never knew. Later, sometimes, he thought perhaps he'd slept.

Then, dimly, he became conscious of a sound . . . a humming, persistent vibrance that grew steadily louder. It dawned on him that he'd forgotten to turn off the light-loop's master switch.

He got up and started towards the control panel.

In the same instant, he glimpsed a shadowy figure, framed in the the door-like scaffolding of tubes and metal that formed the gateway to the shining silver plain that lay like a shimmering no-man's land between the parallel worlds.

Horning came up short, staring.

The figure outlined in the light-loop grew sharper. A man lurched through the frame, into the room. His face was Horning's face, and he staggered under the weight of a transdimensional registration unit, plus a great, bulging, cumbersome bundle slung across his shoulder.

Horning started forward.

His visitor said, "Hold it!" sharply and brought a snub-barreled, too-familiar pistol into view.

Horning stopped in his tracks.

"You mean—it's you—?"

The man from beyond the barrier laughed and spilled the bulky bundle off his shoulder, down onto the floor. "Of course, Doctor! I thought I'd return your visit." He prodded the bundle with his toe. "I even brought you a present."

"But . . . I thought you said you'd never developed a successful transit unit . . ."

"I hadn't, till you came along and showed me how. As I told you, I'd worked out the components. Once I had a chance to look over your unit, integrating them was no job at all."

"But why . . . ?"

THE man with Horning's face laughed again. "That comes later, my friend. After you've admired the present I brought you."

Horning eyed the bundle. Limp and bulky, it was nearly six feet long and wrapped loosely in a covering of some greenish plastic.

"Go ahead. Look it over," his visitor invited, gesturing with the gun. "It's all yours."

New uneasiness crept through Horning. Slowly, he came forward and, kneeling, started to untie the cords that held the bundle closed.

"You're too slow," the man said.

"Here. Let me do it."

He tugged at one corner of the covering. The plastic tore away.

Feminine hair came into view. A head lolled over, exposed.

Horning found himself staring down into a nightmarish, waxen face. A thin breath bubbled the lips. He leaped back, choking.

"Myrtle—!"

"Correct," his counterpart chuckled. "Or perhaps I should say—*my* Myrtle."

"*Your* Myrtle—?" A convulsive tremor shook Horning. "But I thought . . ."

"You thought I had a charming wife who held a fortune in her own name," the other retorted coolly. "The part about the fortune was true. As for the rest"—he shrugged—"well, you can see that I, too, married a wasp-tongued shrew named Myrtle—the coexisting counterpart of your own trouble."

With an effort, Horning stilled his trembling. "Then why lie to me?" he demanded in sudden, flaring anger. "What possible reason—"

"I was afraid to let you know. And . . . I needed time to work out a plan." The sardonic lines about his alter ego's mouth etched deeper. "I've taken care of that detail now."

Horning drew back another step. "I don't think I care to hear about it," he clipped tightly.

"Oh, but you must!" his counterpart retorted. "You see, you're vi-

tal to it."

"I don't care for that, either."

The other's deep-set eyes glinted. "Not even if it would enable you to get rid of your own wife in perfect safety?"

"No."

"It's a wonderful plan. So simple . . ."

Horning cut him off with a short, decisive gesture. "I don't want to hear it."

The man with Horning's face took one fast step forward. His head seemed to draw down between his shoulders. "And I say you're going to hear it, whether you want to or not!" he snapped harshly. He swung the gun in a threatening arc. "I don't intend to have gone through all of this for nothing."

HORNING hooked his thumbs in his belt and met the other's cold eyes with all the bravado he could muster. He said nothing.

"I merely propose that we switch wives," his counterpart clipped.

"Switch wives—!" Shock startled the words from Horning.

"Could anything be simpler? Here are two women, completely identical. Both are stupid, both terma-gants in their own right. So, each falls asleep tonight in her own world. In the morning, she wakes up in another."

Horning twisted at his belt. Narrow-eyed, frowning, he stared at his visitor. "But why—?"

The man's thin lips parted in a mirthless grin. "How would you feel if, stupid and knowing nothing of transdimensional transit, you were suddenly to awaken in a completely strange world? What would be your chances of making a successful adjustment?"

"I . . . I don't know . . ."

"Adjustment to environment is the key to integration of personality. When anyone loses touch with his world, the background he knows as reality, he can no longer adjust." Horning's counterpart paused. His voice dropped a note. "Every plane has facilities to take care of such unfortunates."

The skin along the back of Horning's neck prickled. "You mean . . . Myrtle would go mad?" he whispered hoarsely.

"That's what the psychiatrists would say, at least."

A new tremor shook Horning. Unsteadily, he made his way to the chair by the desk and slumped into it.

His other self chuckled. "It's beautiful, isn't it? All you need to do is call the authorities in the morning. They'll take Myrtle to the nearest mental hospital for observation—and that's the last you'll ever see of her."

Horning's collar was all at once too tight. His palms grew wet with icy sweat.

His coexisting self leaned back against the light-loop's control pan-

el. The pistol hung loose at his side.

"We have an undetectable anesthetic in my world," he observed. "A few drops of it on a handkerchief, pressed over your Myrtle's face tonight, will make her sleep as soundly as my wife is sleeping over there." He nodded to the still figure on the floor.

Horning scrubbed the sweat from his hands against his pant-legs. Shivering, he ran his fingers through his hair.

"You'll be free to follow your research, wherever it leads you," his counterpart murmured dreamily. "For me, I'll have my Myrtle's fortune to console me." He laughed softly. "What could be simpler, or sweeter?"

Horning slumped deeper into the chair. He rubbed at his cheeks; squeezed his eyes tight shut and then opened them again. The skin across his forehead seemed to draw tighter and tighter, like a band of steel, till it was all he could do to keep from screaming aloud. He twisted, shifted, slid down further.

His counterpart stretched. The dreamy look left the deep-set eyes.

"We're dawdling too long. It's time we got started." He straightened. "Come on."

"No," said Horning.

The man from across the barrier between the parallel worlds half turned, head tilted, brows suddenly knitting. "What—?"

"I said no," Horning answered

through dry lips. "I'm not going to do it."

THE other's lean face went blank, incredulous. He came a step towards Horning. "Do you know what you're saying, man? Would you actually pass up a chance like this to rid yourself of that harridan you married?"

Horning shifted in his seat. He dodged the other's eyes, not speaking.

"But why? Why won't you? You'll never have another chance like this."

"I don't know why," said Horning. "Or . . . maybe I do . . ." His voice trailed off.

The other took a stand directly before him—feet spread apart, face cold and rocky. "Don't give me that! We're really one—remember? I know how you feel. You want to do it!"

The fury in the man's voice struck an answering spark in Horning. He came up from the chair. "I want to—but I'm not going to! Now get out! And take her"—he gestured towards the other's unconscious wife—"with you!"

His counterpart seemed to grow suddenly taller. "When I'm ready to go, I'll tell you!"

"You'll go now!"

"No!"

Horning started forward.

The other whipped up his gun. "I've come too far to quit now," he clipped tightly. "If you're too

much of a fool or a coward to go along, then that's your bad luck. I'll handle things a different way." His lips twisted. "Back up against the wall!"

For the fraction of a second, Horning hesitated. But the gun in his alter ego's hand stayed steady.

Horning backed away.

"Maybe this way is better, after all," his counterpart said. "Maybe I should have planned it like this from the start."

New lines of strain slashed his lean, sardonic face. The deep-set eyes took on a light almost of madness.

Then — lightning fast; without warning—he pivoted. The pistol in his hand made flat, clicking sounds. There was no report, no muzzle flare.

Three times he fired—straight at the limp form of his bound, drugged wife.

Dust leaped from the plastic wrapper as the slugs smashed home. The woman's body jerked convulsively.

Horning gave a hoarse cry and leaped forward.

His counterpart jumped aside. He hit Horning hard on the back of the neck with the pistol.

Horning slammed to the floor. The room rocked about him.

As from afar, he heard his alter ego's voice: "Get up!"

Horning dragged himself to his knees, choking and gasping. He caught a blurred glimpse of the limp figure of the woman who had been

his counterpart's wife. A thin trickle of blood was seeping from her mouth . . .

"Get up, I said!" the killer cried in a tight terrible voice.

He kicked Horning in the side.

Horning rolled away, pain stabbing through him. He scrambled to his feet.

"Climb onto the desk!"

SHAKING, Horning clambered up, standing half-crouched with the top of his head pressing the ceiling. A water pipe lay like a cold knife-blade against the back of his neck.

His counterpart dragged a coil of insulated wire from the workbench and threw it to Horning. "Here! Tie a noose!"

In aching silence, Horning looped and twisted the wire.

"You know what happens now, don't you?" The murderer from another world leered up at him, rocking with laughter, and this time there was no mistaking the madness in the deep-set eyes. "You're going to anchor that wire to the water pipe, and put the noose around your scrawny neck, and jump off the desk! After that"—he laughed again—"I'll take your wife and go back to my own plane. When they find you here, with my Myrtle and my gun, they'll say you murdered her and hanged yourself!"

"They won't believe it!" Horning blurted. He groped desperately.

"They—they'll know from the gun. There's no other like it on this plane—"

"—So, they'll say it's a new development by the renowned scientist, Doctor Raymond X. Horning—" Abruptly, the man who was Horning's counterpart broke off. His mirth vanished, replaced by cold, gun-backed menace. "You're stalling! Anchor that wire!"

A knot of black fear drew tight in Horning's midriff. Numbly, he fumbled with wire and pipe.

"Anchor it!"

Horning sucked in air.

"Hurry up!"

Horning let the wire drop.

The coil hit the edge of the desk, hung for a moment, and then rolled off onto the floor.

The other's eyes flicked down to it. He cursed and took one short step forward, hand outstretched.

Horning dived off the desk, straight at him.

The man from beyond the barrier started back. He jerked up the gun.

His shot went wild. Horning landed on him with bone-crushing impact. The gun skated off across the room. They crashed to the floor together, rolling over and over till they hit the workbench. It rocked wildly. Tools cascaded over them.

Twisting, Horning drove a blow at his counterpart's face.

The other writhed away. His elbow jabbed into Horning's throat.

Horning choked. Before he could

recover, a knee found his belly. The wind went out of him. His adversary broke free and scrambled away, clawing for the gun.

Horning lunged after him. He caught a foot . . . jerked and twisted with all his might.

The killer sprawled, flat on his face. But his outstretched hand clutched the pistol.

Horning snatched a Stillson wrench from the litter of tools fallen from the workbench.

His counterpart rolled, whipping round the gun.

HORNING lashed out with the wrench, straight at the other's head. It struck home with a sound like that of a dropped watermelon bursting on a concrete sidewalk.

The killer went limp.

Horning sagged back, panting. After a moment, he saw that his counterpart had stopped breathing.

Horning staggered to his feet. His stomach churned. He lurched to the wastebasket beside the desk and vomited.

Then a dull, shuffling sound impinged upon him. Swaying, Horning came erect and peered round behind him.

Myrtle stood in the doorway, eyes blacker and beadier than ever. Her jaw was set, her greying hair loose and disheveled. She wore a frayed, ancient kimona and dirty white mules.

Horning choked, "Myrtle, get

back—" and tried to move round between her and the bodies. But she pushed past without speaking, straight to his fallen counterpart, and bent as swiftly as her bulk would allow. When she straightened, she held the murderer's pistol in her hand.

"Myrtle, be careful—!"

She shoved him back with a meaty hand, blocking him with her body, the gun held behind her. He could not read her expression. When she spoke, her voice was flat and without feeling, no longer strident: "I heard it all, Raymond—all the conniving . . . how you hate me . . . that monster's scheme to steal his wife's fortune . . ."

Horning shrugged, not bothering to answer. Squatting down, he began gathering together the tools spilled from the workbench.

"Raymond . . ."

Horning glanced up, then stiffened.

Myrtle had brought round the pistol. She was pointing it at him.

In the same flat voice she said: "Put on that outfit, Raymond. That transdimensional whatever-you-call-it."

Horning let the tools fall. "Are you out of your mind, woman? In this shambles, with two corpses . . ." He choked, unable to go on.

Myrtle said: "Put it on." Her face was a mask, an enigma. Her voice stayed low, completely devoid of emotion. "I'll kill you if you

don't."

Horning stared into his wife's eyes. They were inscrutable, hard and blank and black as twin balls of polished onyx.

Myrtle's lips parted. Her jowls quivered. She steadied the pistol.

Very slowly, very wearily, Horning rose. Wordless, he crossed to the transdimensional registration unit and strapped it on.

"Go over in the corner," his wife ordered. "Stand with your face against the wall."

Horning obeyed. He wondered whether Myrtle intended to shoot him in the back.

Or maybe she'd just gone mad.

Whatever it was, he decided, he didn't much care.

METAL scraped on metal. Something thudded on the floor. The hoarse wheeze of Myrtle's breathing, the slap and shuffle of her mules, sounded loud in the stillness.

After another moment, Myrtle said, "Turn around."

Horning pivoted, then stared.

His wife now wore the other transit unit, the one by means of which Horning's counterpart had crossed the barrier between the parallel worlds.

"All right, Raymond." She gestured to the light-loop's glowing, door-like frame. "Go through."

"Go through—?"

"Yes. Ahead of me. I'll follow."

"No." Horning put flat finality into his voice. "You don't understand what that frame is for, Myrtle—what lies on the other side—"

"Don't tell me what I don't understand!" For an instant the old stridency rang in Myrtle's words. "I've read those things you wrote—remember? Your notes, too. I know what I'm doing!" She thrust the pistol forward. "Go on! Go through!"

Once again, Horning studied his wife's face, to no avail. He made a wry mouth. Then, turning, he walked up the ramp, and stepped through the light-loop's pulsating, tube-laden frame.

The silver plain stretched endlessly before him . . . infinitely vast, infinitely lonely.

Horning shivered a little and swung about.

A bulky figure loomed close at hand, framed in the light-loop's glow. A moment later, Myrtle was beside him, staring across the shimmering wastes wide-eyed. She cringed before the immensity and desolation of it, knuckles white, face slack and waxy grey. Horning could almost taste her fear.

He prodded her: "What now?"

She shook as with a chill, not answering. Then, peering down into the scanner screen, she fumbled with the calibrated knobs that shifted the scene from plane to plane.

Horning began, "If you'd only tell me what you want—"

"Shut up."

The seconds ticked into minutes. The minutes marched stolidly on. A half hour dragged by. An hour. And still Myrtle spun the registration dials.

Horning shifted, closed his eyes. A haze seemed to rise about him. He was so tired he could hardly stand.

Myrtle said, "Raymond . . ."

Horning shook away the haze.

HIS wife's expression was more unfathomable than ever. She stepped closer, and now he saw that she was holding out the pistol, butt-foremost, as if to hand it to him.

He reached up to take the weapon.

But instead of releasing it, she brushed his hand aside and brought the gun-butt down sharply on the screen of Horning's scanning scope.

The scanner smashed to splinters.

Horning went rigid. But before he could move, his wife had jerked back the gun, reversed it, and leveled it at him.

Horning cursed aloud.

For the first time, Myrtle smiled.

It reminded Horning of the grin on a bleaching skull.

She said: "Set your dials at 830-X-974."

For a moment Horning hesitated. But the gun was very steady. Seething, he did as he was told.

"Now turn your projector drive

to high."

Horning gripped the corner of his unit's bulky case. "Where are you sending me? Why did you smash the scanner so I couldn't see?"

"We're both going. Turn it to high." Her eyes mocked him. The pistol menaced.

Horning threw the switch.

"Now, reintegrate . . ."

A wave of utter helplessness, utter hopelessness, engulfed Horning. He pressed the button.

A room materialized about him—a room almost the twin of his own basement laboratory. There was the workbench, there the desk. A frame close akin to that of the light-loop rose against one wall.

A man sprawled on his back near the control panel. His face was Horning's face.

Horning bent over him and felt for some trace of pulse, then straightened, to find Myrtle once more standing beside him.

"He's dead," Horning said.

She nodded. Her lips twitched. "Take off your unit."

"My unit—?"

"Yes," She gestured to the dead man. "Put it on him."

"What—?"

"I said, put it on him." All the flatness was back in Myrtle's voice.

In a numb, aching void of silence, Horning obeyed.

"Set the dials for 701-G-0060."

Horning's fingers went stiff. He looked up at his wife, hardly be-

lieving his own ears. "You mean . . . ?"

"I mean, I'm going to the world that murdering monster in our basement came from!" Myrtle's breasts rose and fell in a sudden tempest of emotion. She was breathing noisily, too fast. The greying hair fell over her face, and her eyes were drawn to hot black pinpoints. "You wanted to get rid of me, didn't you? You were ready to try anything short of murder or sending me to the madhouse? So I'm leaving you here. That other woman had a fortune. I'll have a better life in her place than you ever gave me!"

"But this man here . . ."

"He died a natural death. That's all I care about. I'll be a widow—a wealthy widow . . ."

THE words went on, but Horning hardly heard. He sagged back against the workbench—shaken, unable to speak. It was as if, of a sudden, he were seeing his wife through new eyes.

She crowded close to him and said, "One other thing . . ."

Her hand darted out. She snatched Margaret's picture from Horning's pocket—ripping it to shreds, scuffing the fragments.

Horning made no effort to stop her.

"I hate her!" Myrtle cried. "That woman—that creature—she could be dead a thousand years and I'd still hate her—!"

She broke off, shaking, and switched both transit units' projector drives to high, then pressed the disintegrator buttons.

In the tick of a clock, both woman and corpse had vanished.

New weariness welled up in Horning . . . weariness, and a sudden, stabbing pang of pity. In the awful emptiness of losing Margaret, he'd plunged down, all the way, till finally he'd been blinded and panicked into marrying Myrtle. Then, climbing from the depths once more, he'd come to hate her.

Now, that, too, was past. The hate was dead; the bitterness had fallen from him. He knew the fault lay as much with him as her. They were simply dog and cat, not suited.

He even found himself hoping she'd find happiness in the world to which she'd fled.

It made him smile a little; and he knew it was good that he *could* smile . . . that he'd grown so much in depth and understanding.

Besides, he'd always have his memories of Margaret . . .

Coming erect, then, he looked around the room once more, and discovered it offered fascinating variations on a dozen familiar themes. There were devices he'd never seen before, complex equipment whose use he couldn't even guess at. It pleased him. Whatever else this plane might offer, at least there'd be research to keep him busy.

Above the nearest bench, a buzzer rang.

For a moment Horning hesitated. Then, shrugging, he picked his way through the litter of strange devices to the door and threw it open.

Tantalizing, intermingled scents of roast and fresh-baked apple pie and coffee drifted to him, warm and savory. From the head of the stairs, a silhouetted figure beckoned.

"Come to supper, Ray," called Margaret . . .

THE END

COMING NEXT ISSUE:—

THE WEAPON FROM ETERNITY

By DWIGHT V. SWAIN

What terrible discovery had Earth's greatest scientist made? Why did he betray his own people in their hour of need? Were the worlds of the solar system doomed to destruction in a matter of days? . . . Jarl Corvett pondered these questions as he set out across the void on a mission that could only end in disaster. For he too was looking for a dread secret—hidden on a mystery satellite, a weapon from eternity—a weapon too dreadful to use! Reserve your copy at your newsdealer! Or better yet subscribe and save money. See page 162!

THE BIG SEPTEMBER ISSUE ON SALE FIRST WEEK IN JULY!



Conducted by Mari Wolf

WE went to a LASFS meeting the other night, and found that it was a very special one. It was Auld Lang Syne night, the seven hundred and fiftieth meeting of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society.

Seven hundred and fifty weekly sessions don't seem like so many, until you begin dividing them by fifty-two and find that about fifteen years have gone by since the club was founded. Then it seems like a long time indeed, especially when you realize that some of these founding members, who were very young fans then, are still fans, though a bit older and maybe a bit more restrained.

Forrest J. Ackerman presided over the Remember When portion of the meeting. He can remember all the way back. He was one of the founding members of the old Science Fiction League, as the club was called then. He and Russ Hodgkins, who was also in from the beginning, were the only two original members still around for the anniversary. But there were lots of other old-timers

there, fans who had joined the League in the days before the war. Forrie had rounded up as many as he could find, and had them get up one by one and talk about fandom as it used to be.

The old days are legendary in a lot of ways. I was fascinated sitting there listening to accounts of what went on years and years ago, back when I was just a school kid still oblivious to the worlds of science fiction and fantasy. It made me wish I'd found out about the club years ago and been a part of it and seen some of the episodes the old-timers were teasing each other about. Lots of these old-timers were kids themselves, then.

At one time or another many of the top writers in the stf field passed through the club. Heinlein, Kuttner, Van Vogt, Brackett were just a few of the names mentioned. And of course there was Ray Bradbury, who is described in one of the early World Science Fiction Convention booklets as that bright eager young fan from Los Angeles.

He was at LASFS the other night,

reminiscing about the Good Old Days . . .

After a while all the old-timers got to talking about the Good Old Days. Most of them seemed to be of the same opinion, that the young fans today aren't quite as eager as they were, or quite as enthusiastic or devoted to the club. They spoke as if they'd grown away from the club because the club itself had changed. They talked of times when they all got together, between meetings, and spent a whole day putting out a fanzine, then walked home late at night, with the mimeoing done, talking about the next one they were going to put out. It's not like that now, they said.

I don't agree. Not completely, anyway. I'm pretty sure that when the fifteen hundredth anniversary rolls around some of the present day members, long inactive, will gather together and start reminiscing about the Good Old Days back in 1952.

BUT there have been changes. Lots of them. Back in the thirties science fiction was far from booming. There weren't science fiction radio programs nor television shows nor movies, except for the early Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers serials. Science fiction books were harder to get, and money was harder to get, also. The fans of the depression years made their own fun. They had to.

Maybe if it weren't for the radio and television and more magazines than anyone except an addict like me can find time to read, more fans would put out fanzines. Maybe more clubs would get together, not only for regular meetings, but between times, for long sessions at each other's houses, talking about the world of the future and flights to the planets and their own chances, maybe, at being in on them.

There were other factors, too, that tended to make science fiction fans band together more closely then. In those days, to be interested in science fiction was to be considered a dreamer. Sensible people said, "Fairy Stories," and sniffed and let it go at that. I can remember very clearly my own attempts to talk about rocket travel and exploring other planets and the possibility of horrible futures, such as widespread bacteriological warfare, and I remember the inevitable reaction of people who weren't interested in science fiction. They didn't disagree nor argue. They just scoffed. It was all very silly. "Why don't you quit wasting your time on that stuff?" they said.

This, of course, was before the days of the V2 and the atom bomb.

Now there isn't so much scoffing, though there's still enough of it to make a true blue fan feel a bit superior at times. People are getting used to the idea of rocket ships, of space stations, of getting up off this Earth of ours at last. It mightn't be so long now, not nearly as far off as we'd imagined it would be, when we were kids. It isn't a matter of the twenty-fifth century any more.

Maybe some of the kids who are very young fans now, in clubs like LASFS or off by themselves somewhere, reading science fiction and putting out fanzines and dreaming about the stars—maybe some of them will really go rocketing off into space some day.

And if that day comes a lot of us will be able to look back a few years, to the days before World War II, and summon up images of all the scoffers who called us dreamers and say, "We told you so."

By then, though, they'll probably have forgotten that they ever scoffed . . .

I guess I'll just settle for the fif-

teen hundredth anniversary of LASFS or even the thousandth, if we're around in this part of the country then. I wonder if things will have changed as much as they have these past few years, and in what direction? What will have happened, anyway? Which of all possible futures will turn out to be the actual one? How much of what is now science fiction will then be everyday reality?

I wonder too if I'll look back to now as the Good Old Days. Probably. I doubt that they'll manage to change human nature that much in a few short years . . .

THERE'S another anniversary coming up, one I'm sure all of you would enjoy being in on—the Tenth Anniversary World Science Fiction Convention. It's going to be held in Chicago, over the Labor Day Weekend, August 30th., 31st., and September 1st.

Preparations are going ahead full steam to make this the biggest and best get-together ever. The Committee has arranged to hold the convention in the Morrison Hotel's Terrace Room, which is arranged in the form of an amphitheatre, with tiers of seats rising from a large stage. There shouldn't be any craning of necks to see what's going on this year.

For the fans who are interested in either putting on or viewing exhibits there's an anteroom to the main convention hall for the displaying of science fiction books or pictures or what have you.

As in other Conventions, you can join the World Convention Committee by sending in a dollar. Lots of fans join the Committee even if they know they can't attend, for these dollars pay the initial expenses of putting a convention together. And if you are planning to attend, why

not send in your dollar ahead of time? You'll get all the pre-convention bulletins, telling all the current news and plans, and you'll get your copy of the program booklet. So send your dollar to the Science Fiction Convention, Box 1422, Chicago 90, Illinois. And follow it to Chicago, if you can, along about August 30th.

I hope you don't have the idea that these Conventions are only for the really active fans—those who belong to big clubs, or spend all their spare time publishing fanzines, or collect science fiction on a large scale. It isn't so. The Convention is for anyone who is interested in science fiction, who likes to read it, and who would like to know more about the people who write it and illustrate it and edit it—both professional and amateur. It's for fans—but there's always room for another fan or two.

You can have a lot of fun at the Convention even if you don't have the slightest desire to write the stuff or collect libraries of it. Maybe you are interested in the ideas behind science fiction, the concepts of future worlds or the gimmicks and gadgets that the writers toss around so casually. Maybe you're more interested in the space ship itself rather than in the problems of the men who fly it—or maybe it's the human equation that fascinates you. Either way, you'll find people with the same interests.

Perhaps you just read science fiction and fantasy because it is Imagination—as far as possible from the monotony of an everyday job. You may have a sneaking suspicion that you'd be happier piloting a rocket ship somewhere . . . Or perhaps you just like to read about twenty different writers' twenty different ideas of what a small segment of the future will be like, and

compare your own ideas to theirs, and speculate . . .

Or perhaps, you say, you just read science fiction for pleasure. You're not a fan at all, you're sure. Who knows? Maybe you'd like to be one. To get to know other fans and join them at club meetings and have other people to talk over your latest ideas with. It's a lot of fun sharing your interest in fantasy with others who have the same interest.

So if you like science fiction at all (and why else would you be reading IMAGINATION?) and if you're around Chicago this Labor Day Weekend, drop in at the Convention. It could easily be that you're a fan at heart and just don't know it.

Now to the fanzines.

First off, I want to explain the mechanics of this column to those fanzine editors who have sent me review copies and then seen nothing in print about them, month after month. I'm not ignoring them. But every couple of months I receive a stack of fanzines, those accumulated during the past two months. Sometime in the next few weeks I have a column deadline. The reviews go in and later appear on the stands.

I know it's a slow process, but it just can't be helped . . .

* * *

THE JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION: 25c; 3 times a year; Mr. Charles Freudenthal, 1331 W. Newport Ave., Chicago 13, Ill., c/o JSF. The JSF is a new magazine, devoted to what has been called "adult" science fiction. Its purpose, as stated in its editorial, will be "to seek through intelligent and mature articles to analyze the many ramifications of present day science fiction."

It's an excellent magazine, excellently packaged. The articles are diverse and thought-provoking. In what might be called the non-com-

mercial approach to stf the Journal is at the opposite pole from the mimeoed, stapled-together fanzine.

But there's a point of view in the Journal I disagree with rather violently. Mr. Freudenthal states emphatically that "the JSF does not believe in fan fiction, that if a story is good it belongs in a professional magazine and if it's bad, why read it?" His is a fairly widespread viewpoint. Why encourage a thirteen year old's obviously amateurish stories? Why not rip them apart and tell the would-be writer to go back to school until he can spell, as well as plot, characterize and develop emotional depth?

I don't agree. After all, a writer learns by writing. And a would-be writer, especially a young one, is more likely to turn out more work and try harder and develop faster if other people read what he writes. It's very discouraging to work in a vacuum. But a group of young writers, all amateur in style and plotting, all "bad" from any lofty critical standpoint, can still get together and work and praise each other's progress, however slight, as well as criticize each other's shortcomings constructively. The result? Maybe nothing of an earth shattering nature. Or maybe a new star or two on the literary horizon a few years from now . . .

I like fan fiction. I don't expect it to be professional, and can therefore be happily uncritical. I don't lump it together with the more literary and technical magazines such as the JSF—which is, actually, more of the genre known as the "little" magazine.

I read fan fiction for fun, and I even enjoy every cliché, as long as the spirit behind it is fresh. After all, in this troubled age when everything must be either significant or damned, it's quite unusual to find

something that's done just for fun.
Most fan fiction is.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWSSCOPE: 5c or 12/50c; monthly; Lawrence R. Campbell, 43 Tremont St., Malden 48, Mass. I don't know where you could get a newsier little fanzine, and for only a nickel too.

Newsscope gives you the general big news, such as what pro is putting out what new magazine, book reviews, reviews of movies, TV, comic strips, etc. It also reviews fanzines, disposing of most of them with harsh capsule comments. And R. J. Banks has a column called Slurp. Is that what he thinks of the radio and TV shows he covers? Huh?

Larry Campbell also sends me the first copy of the NEW ENGLAND FANTASY NEWSLETTER. Its object is to get a group of New England fans together into a group, with club meetings, regional get-togethers, fanzines and other stf activity.

The trial issue of the Newsletter consists principally of the names and addresses of the members so far—nine of them, scattered through Massachusetts and Connecticut. If you're a New England fan and don't know about the group, why not contact Lawrence Campbell, 43 Tremont St., Malden 48, Mass.

PEON: 15c bimonthly; Charles Lee Riddle, PN1 USN, Fleet All Weather Training Unit, Pacific, c/o Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, Calif. Actually this is an out of date address, since the Riddles headed through here, New York bound, over New Year's. But they didn't know where they'd be, so I suppose the Navy can forward any fifteen cent pieces you send his way . . .

As usual the No. 20 issue has some very good articles and stories.

I liked Gene Hunter's "Martian Interlude" for its mood. But best of all I liked the Fanzine Classic, a reprint from a 1946 Shangri-La. It was called the "World of Null-V," Van Vogtian, of course. Who wrote it though? Peon doesn't say . . .

COSMAG SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST: 25c; bimonthly; Ian Maccauley, 57 East Park Lane, N. E., Atlanta 5, Ga. This combination of Henry Burwell's SF Digest and Maccauley's Cosmag make up a really good fanzine, for you'll find just about everything in its two halves.

For instance the No. 2 issue leads off with the Digest section and Walt Willis' report on London fandom and Arthur C. Clarke. It's called "The Immortal Teacup," a most intriguing title.

And in Cosmag there's Terry Carr's story "Land of Shadows" and a somewhat half-hearted (as of this issue, at least) feud between Paul Ganley and Lee Hoffman over each other's editorial ability.

STF READER: 10 or 4/25c; monthly; Jack Irwin, Box 3, Tyro, Kansas. Do you collect science fiction magazines, books or both? Do you want to start doing so? Or do you have an attic full of back issues that you'd like to sell or swap for an attic full of different back issues?

If your answer to any of the above is "yes", why not send in a dime for the Trader and see what's what in the swap market. In this advertising fanzine you might find just what you're looking for. Or you can try advertising there yourself . . .

MAD: 15c; bimonthly; Dick Ryan, 224 Broad St., Newark, Ohio. Here's a brand-new fanzine that really lives up to its name by being delightfully zany. Ryan and associate Dick Lippincott call it the Gleep-zine, because

of the space ship full of Gleeps that burrowed a hole in their garden and are living there now. You don't believe it? They've got pictures to prove it!

A phrase or two lifted from their magazine review, (reviewing MADGE, by the way). "Incidentally we note the Introduction of Author biographies with pleasure—we have always harbored the impious suspicion that there are really only two science fiction writers, each with a hundred pen names: Henry Kuttner and Rog Phillips."

You know, sometimes I get the suspicion that maybe I am merely a Rog Phillips pen name. Horrible thought, to be, not Mari Wolf, but R. P.'s ego Number 99 . . . instead of his better—marital half!

Mad thought, isn't it?

SLANT: published as frequently as possible at Oblique House, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd. Belfast, Ireland. Editor Walter Willis. One issue for one recent U. S. sf promag, or 1/3, or 25c.

Slant is a printed fanzine that's really something exceptional. I guess I can express it best by saying that it looks a lot more professional than many professional magazines themselves.

Take the winter issue cover, for instance—a very simple space ship against a multicolored, spectrum background. Very effective.

As for the stories, I can't pick a favorite. I started reading this issue while sitting in a very cold, damp, badly lit garage, and I just about froze to death by telling myself "Just one more story and then I'll go upstairs." I read it all the way through first . . .

That's about all, except that Slant is a really top magazine, fan or not.

FAN-VET: monthly; Ray Van Hou-

ten, 127 Spring St., Paterson 3, N.J. The Fantasy Veterans Association reports here on the doings of fans in the services and is devoted to their interests. One of the Association's activities is helping procure and send science-fiction and fantasy magazines to overseas servicemen—something that's really appreciated.

Membership in the Fantasy Veterans is open to U. S. Armed Forces veterans and present personnel.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER: 15c bimonthly; Bob Tucker, Box 260, Bloomington, Ill. Bob Tucker's News Letter rolls right along, informative as always. It manages to cover the field completely and entertainingly, giving lots of fan news and reports on fan activity as well as news about the professional sf field.

Especially to be recommended are his Convention reports—so after Chicago next Labor Day you'll probably want to get hold of the Newsletter reviews that cover it.

FANVARIETY: 10c; monthly; W. Max Keasler, Box 24, Washington U., St. Louis 5, Mo. Keasler and co-editor Bill Venable can turn out an unusual fanzine, and they usually do. They feature stories, articles, book reviews, artwork, etc., often quite controversial and very often satirical.

Such as, in the No. 11 issue, Venable's drawings of bathing suit-clad men, for the girl fans who get tired of looking at nothing but pictures of bathing suit-clad women.

In the same issue Don Nardizzi has a wonderful vignette of the future about fans in 2005 A.D., who band together to read Non Science Fiction, an obscure and almost forgotten type of literature printed on very low grade microfilm. "It Can Happen Here" he says . . .

SOL: 10c published irregularly; David Ish, 914 Hammond Road, Ridgewood, N. J. This zine is still young and far from professional looking, the mimeoing being blurred in spots. But it's the kind of fanzine I really get a kick out of reading—an up and coming young zine by an up and coming young editor (I learn from his editorial that Dave is only thirteen.). He's getting off to a good start, too.

So you're going to the Convention, Dave? Hope we'll meet you there . . .

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. Fantasy Times has now completed more than ten years of bringing to fandom the news, highlights, and everything of interest in the science fiction field.

Have you got the habit of reading your stf newspaper? If you haven't, you're missing something. It really lives up to its subheading, "The World of Tomorrow Today."

DESTINY: 25c; quarterly; Malcolm Willits, 11848 S. E. Powell Blvd., Portland 66, Ore. One thing that stands out particularly in this photo-offset fanzine is its artwork, particularly that of co-editor Jim Bradley. So when Bradley writes on Science Fiction's Prozone Art, as he does in the No. 4-5 issue, you know that he knows his field.

In this issue 400 is Charles Stuart's "Sports, 2000 A. D.," a lament over the "all war, no play attitude" of most stf. And of course, there's Hannes Bok's cover. 'Nuff said.

TIME STREAM: 10c; quarterly; 3403 6th Ave., Columbus, Ga. Inflation doesn't seem to have hit down Columbus way yet. You still get a lot for your dime if you invest it in Time Stream.

The editors, J. T. Oliver, Paul Cox and Van Splawn, manage to corral a lot of good fiction, such as Wilson Tucker's "Omitted from History," a bit of ironic warfare on a far-off planet. Try it . . .

SHADOWLAND: 10c; published irregularly; Sam Martinez, Box 2032, Tulsa, Okla. This is, according to its cover, the Eerie Fanzine. I liked best Martinez' "Rejection Slip," a little tale in which an stf mag turns into a romance type.

But Sam, on reading some of your other stories, isn't Shadowland doing the same thing?

FANTASY ADVERTISER: 20c; bi-monthly; 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. Or really I suppose it should be called Science Fiction Advertiser, since the name change will be in effect when you read this.

The Advertiser is a flat must for a science fiction collector. But it's also a beautiful zine, Morris Scott Dollens' covers, for instance, being about the best in the field. You can enjoy a high degree of technical and literary skill here. And the quality isn't going to be crammed down your throat, either.

SHANGRI-LA: quarterly; Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society; 1305 W. Ingraham St., Los Angeles, Calif. "Shaggy," the official organ of the LASFS, is put out by various club members, with the editorship changing from issue to issue.

Having already devoted so much space to the LASFS, I won't need to tell you any more about Shaggy than that I'm sure you'll like it.

Well, that's all for now. See you next issue. And remember, send your fanzines to me, Mari Wolf, FANDORA'S BOX, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. See you in Chicago!

—MARI WOLF

Letters from the Readers

THE COMING CONVENTION

Dear Bill:

This is a personal invitation.

It's being extended to you—and to every reader of IMAGINATION who would like a chance to live science fiction in a unique way for three wonderful days. Of course the readers of Madge are already aware of the coming Tenth Anniversary World Science Fiction Convention which is to be held over the Labor Day weekend at the Morrison Hotel in Chicago; you've given the Convention a great deal of publicity already—let's call this a reminder to the readers along with the invitation. And here are a few of the really pertinent facts to remember:

There will be talks by favorite authors, editors, and fans, as well as hilarious entertainment. There will be an auction of original magazine artwork and an exclusive premiere showing of a new science fiction motion picture.

But the most enjoyable feature of all is getting together with fellow science fiction enthusiasts and talking things over.

So if any of Madge's readers have been intending to join the Honor Roll

of Convention Members but have been letting the matter slide, this is to remind them to send in their dollar now to Box 1422, Chicago 90, Illinois. Each member receives regular bulletins and progress reports on the convention—and of course that dollar helps the committee plan a knockout program. So how about you sending in your dollar right now. OK?

Julian May, Chairman
World Science Fiction
Convention
Box 1422

Chicago 90, Illinois

To which we can add little, except, come on gang, get those dollar bills rolling in. They will be worth a hundred times the amount in fun when the Chicon rolls around this summer wkh

SWAIN SHOCKED THEM

Dear Ed:

I knew that sooner or later the time would come for me to write my first letter to the editor—and it has.

We—my husband and I—have just finished reading the March issue of Madge and we ran across something that really gave us a shock—the

kind that sends shivers up and down your spine. It was the name "Kyla" in Dwight Swain's "Dark Destiny".

You see, what shocked us so is the fact that on November 4th, 1951, we had our second baby—a girl—whom we named Kyla!

We made the name up—and that's what's so odd. How did Mr. Swain arrive at the same name, Kyla? We're most anxious to know.

By the way, "Dark Destiny" was very good, and I'm glad now that Kyla wasn't the villainess. My husband and I are newcomers to Madge, but not to science fiction. We've read "Astounding" and "Galaxy" previously. I was actually introduced to science fiction through my husband. I used to sneer at his choice of reading material until I finally read some of it myself!

A word about your January cover—very good. The March cover illustrates the story well but I thought the whole thing was too garish.

You have a good magazine, Mr. Hamling. We'll be watching for coming issues.

Mr. & Mrs. Henry W. Dreyer
Zumbrota, Minn.

As to how Dwight thought up the name, Kyla, we'll let him answer when he reads this. However in the meantime we can tell you when he thought of it—the story was written last August. We're glad you finally discovered Madge—but then we always like to have our readers sample other books first—that makes a first taste of Madge pretty sweet!

. . . with

A STAR IS BORN

Dear Bill:

I don't usually write any of the magazines but after reading the March issue of Madge I just had to put my two cents worth in. I ex-

pected Dwight Swain to be as terrific as he was, but you should have warned us a little more about Danny Galouye. The boy is really something. "Rebirth" was quite an idea. It's actually not new but never has it been so eloquently used. Let's keep more of that calibre coming.

I think you stuck your neck out a wee bit too far when you said "When Worlds Collide" was inferior to such films as "The Thing" and "The Day the Earth Stood Still". While I'll be one of the first to admit that they were all excellent films, I think most fans will agree with me when I reverse your opinion. I believe that "When Worlds Collide" was by far the best of the two or three. You can make your own comparison any way you desire. And I'm forced to agree—as a matter of fact I gladly agree—with Terry Carr and his opinions on "Destination Moon." What's the matter, Bill? Did you have a stake in "The Thing" or something?

Now that I've gotten that off my chest, here's my subscription renewal. I certainly don't want to miss a single issue of Madge—and don't intend to!

Jack M. O'Brien
USS Rowe (DD-504)
c/o FPO, New York, N.Y.

We agree with you, Jack, Danny Galouye is really something—and believe us you're going to see a lot of his stories in Madge in coming issues. As to the movies, we still think "The Thing" & "The Day the Earth Stood Still" are the best Hollywood has made. "When Worlds Collide" was too phony at the end—and the "end of the earth" scenes were ineffectual for our money. As to "Destination Moon" we don't want an education—we repeat—we want entertainment. So there! . . . Anyway, the big thing is Hollywood is stf conscious . . . with

IDEAL FANZINE?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Here's a teaser for your readers: What would an ideal fanzine be like? Would it consist solely of material by fans? Or should the emphasis be on off-trail writing and background material by professionals? Should it appeal primarily to active fans or to casual fans as well?

We want suggestions, for we're plunging into the publication of a new zine, "Fantastic Worlds". It'll be lithographed in a 5½x8½ format, a quarterly selling for \$1.00 per year, sample copy 25c. Our first issue will be ready in May and to encourage fans to submit their best work we're paying for all fiction and articles in the form of cash prizes from 3 to 10 dollars.

And we'll be aiming at that ideal zine. No, we don't promise to achieve our goal, but we'll sure as shootin' try. The zine will be for fans—for the readers of IMAGINATION, and that's why we want their suggestions. We'll publish the most interesting suggestions in "Fantastic Worlds" and the three top ones will receive cash prizes of one dollar each.

Meanwhile we'll be happy to answer queries and to receive contributions, and, of course, subscriptions!

Edward W. Ludwig
1942 Telegraph Ave.
Stockton, Cal.

Say there, Edonardo, where you been hiding yourself? After that fine story of yours in the first issue of Madge a couple of years ago we haven't heard from you. Given up writing completely? If not, here's an invite to come knocking sometime.

As to ideal fanzines—we think there not only can be an ideal zine, but we think there was one—and sadly we doubt if it will ever be duplicated. We're going back nearly fifteen years to reminisce on the

greatest fanzine of them all—SPACEWAYS, edited by a great fan, Harry Warner, Jr. of Hagerstown, Maryland. Your editor was an active fan at that time and always felt proud to be able to contribute a story, poem, article or gossip column to the contents page. Matter of fact, we're quite certain that every other fan and professional contributor felt the same way. For SPACEWAYS had an aura that no other fanzine (as far as we were concerned) or prozine for that matter could boast. It had good material by top professional writers and editors, and the best from the ranks of the fans. It had news, and views, pros and cons, forums—debates, it had, in fact, everything. Perhaps if the war hadn't come along SPACEWAYS would still be in existence, but we've lost touch with our old friend Harry Warner, Jr. since that time. If he happens to read this—drop us a line, Harry! . . . As to your project, Ed, we wish you the best of luck. We have only one suggestion to offer; get a few files of SPACEWAYS and study them for size with

LIVES UP TO ITS NAME

Dear Mr. Hamling:

IMAGINATION, of which you are the editor, really lives up to its name. It is one of the very few science fiction magazines which does not carry pure science stories. Most of the others are sometimes so technical that the ordinary reader, who looks for entertainment, runs into a quagmire of abstruse ideas.

IMAGINATION, on the other hand, blends science with fantasy in a pleasing proportion. Another thing about Madge that I like is that it often does not adhere to space and time travel stories, using other types of pure fantasy.

Keep up the fine work.

Max Zimmering
3935 St. Urbain St.
Montreal, Quebec
Canada

Thanks for the nice words, Max. And you can count on entertainment in Madge—that's the only thing we feature as a steady diet! . . . wth

MORE CONCEPTS, PLEASE . . .

Dear Ed:

That November editorial certainly kicked up a ruckus in the March issue. I found all the ideas expressed in the letters interesting, especially those of the anti-science fans. If said fans don't like science in their stories let them read "Amazing", "Startling", "Thrilling Wonder", "Fantastic Adventures" and the like. One can hardly say those magazines emphasize science, or even logical stories (as a matter of fact even readable stories). Personally, I read science fiction not merely for thrills or high adventure. I like the horizons unfolded by a good writer—the new concepts one cannot find in any other form of fiction. Adventure stories for adventure magazines; let's see concepts in Madge.

In the March issue we see "Dark Destiny" as a good example of an adventure story with no concepts. "Space Opera" was a tickler, "Monbeast" a flop. But beside a "Toffee" story, well . . . say, where is the dream girl? It's been over a year. An idea: when Madge goes monthly (soon!) the first serial might be a nice long Toffee story by Charlie Myers. That way we'd get Toffee every month! How about it?

"The Killer" was well told; let's see a longer one by Oliver. "Rebirth" had an old theme, poorly developed. I was fascinated by those click-stones; this author would be good with a good plot.

"Fantasy Film Flashes" was good reading, but we'll never see a tenth of those movies. The reader departments are always good—which is one big reason I'm subscribing. But that cover! Please, no more of this type—too pulpy.

David Van Arnham
1740-34th Ave. N.
St. Petersburg, Fla.

So you don't read stf for thrills alone? OK, we'll buy that—as long as the concept is secondary to the story. And incidentally, we gather that TOFFEE is a favorite of yours (your gal's on the cover this issue!) and yet the red-headed scamp would not know a concept from oblivion. Huh?

As to the covers, Madge is providing a variety of themes and techniques. No set policy . . . wth

A WONDERFUL NEW WRITER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Wow! You certainly stirred up a hornet's nest with your November editorial. Only the absence of a handy pen prevented me from sending in my little drop of poison, but at this late date who wants to rub salt into the wound . . . As far as your comments to the letters in the March issue goes, I think that what keeps Geoff St. Reynard's work above the fantasy level is his writing skill. And what is adult science fiction? It's hard to put into words, but it isn't basically a scientific lecture with a drop of fiction thrown in. Ray Bradbury writes adult stf although his science is devoted mainly to stating that man has a rocket ship and travels to Mars. All matter of fact like. In comparing adult science fiction to westerns it is, well, the difference between a film like the recent "Broken Arrow" and Hopalong Cassidy.

But now to the March issue. RE-

BIRTH was the best in the issue—excellent, magnificent, terrific, and wonderful. You have discovered a wonderful new writer in Dan Galouye if the rest of his work measures up. TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! better be good!

In closing let me state that although yours truly may send a few brickbats, she continues to buy Madge. Because it's a good magazine—except for such times when you print "November Editorials". Madge is up in the top five of stf. A little hard work will make it No. 1.

(Miss) Arline Gingold
60 Elm St.
Ellenville, N. Y.

You read Dan Galouye's cover story last issue, Arline, what did you think of it? As to that No. 1 position, that's us looking over our shoulder.
... wlh

METEOR STORM AHEAD!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Re "Introducing the Author—Mari Wolf," I've never read such a piece of conceit in my several years of scanning most science fiction publications.

Concerning her not-possibly-remembered journey to Portovelo, Ecuador, and her Junior-Hi reporting and quote: "weekly column in the Laguna Beach paper covering adult education, of all things!" I can only say, so what!

Please do your readers a favor and introduce authors of worth, science fictionally speaking anyway, and if no less egotistic than Miss Wolf, at least more modestly restrained auto-biographically.

By the way, what is Miss Wolf's name, really? Marie (dropping the "e" a la everything Southern California?) or Mary?

Both my husband and I otherwise enjoy IMAGINATION.

Mrs. Paul Learn
209 N. Thurlow Ave.
Margate, N.J.

We're sorry you received such an impression from Mari's auto-biog, Mrs. Learn. We can tell you that the young lady is charming and a very sincere science fiction fan. As to the correct pronunciation of her name, it is the same as the word "mar" with an "e" tacked on, accent on the first syllable. Mari is the wife of Rog Phillips, well known science fiction writer . . . wlh

THE LADY'S CONFUSED

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I am, perhaps, a strange creature. I have been reading science fiction for years—got the habit from older brothers when I was still a kid, but I still haven't found out what it's all about. I usually feel, when I read a story, very much as if I must have come in about the middle of things. Since I read just for fun I sometimes wish each story carried its own glossary so I could figure it out. For instance, what in the name of all future space wars is a "BEM" or a "chitza"—?

As to the covers or interior illustrations, I don't give a whoop about them. In fact, I *don't like* pictures in stories since invariably the artist never sees the characters as I see them. The cover could be plain white for all I care. If I wanted pictures I'd buy a comic magazine!

I remember characters, not authors, so I can't enthuse over this writer or that. I liked "Rebirth" this issue, and I always like "Tof-fee" stories. I thought however that she belonged to "Fantastic Adventures"?

I remain, confused . . .

Ruth N. Brown

Box 93

Slippery Rock, Pa.

A BEM is a bug-eyed-monster, but we can't very well describe "chitza" except to say it is a derogatory term used much as you might call someone, "You rat. . . ." Come to think of it, maybe it would be a good idea if a glossary were supplied with science fiction stories. Anybody care to tackle the chore?

Your views on covers and interior illustrations are quite interesting, Ruth. This is always a topic of great debate among writers, artists, and fans. Personally we like a nice attractive cover painting (or photo as Madge often uses) and good interiors. We can't argue with you though on the fact that artists' conceptions of characters are often vastly different than your own.

Your method of judging an issue by remembering a story, not a writer, is a big point with us. We've always contended that a name means nothing—it's the story that counts. As to Toffee, your editor discovered and developed the series when he edited FA. Since taking over the destiny of Madge, we've taken our dream-gal with us to feature in Madge. You'll be seeing more of Charles Myers' novels in future issues. Did the Toffee novel this issue ring a bell? We thought it was one of the funniest in the series, but then of course we're prejudiced for anything concerning that luscious gal! (Believe us it was quite a thrill to be used as the model for Marc Pillsworth on the cover! You can't get much closer to TOFFEE than that!) with

BORED NO LONGER!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

At last, out of sheer boredom, I broke down and purchased a copy of IMAGINATION. The line on the cover, *Stories of Science and Fantasy*, had led me to believe that IMAGINATION contained popular science articles and a few pieces of fiction of an inferior kind. After reading the letter column and Mari Wolf's reviews, however, I soon realized that this was not the case.

All the stories in the March issue were good! ONCE UPON A MONBEAST . . . took top billing, in my opinion. DARK DESTINY was very good; try to keep the novels this length or longer. The use of serials is perfectly justified for the longer stories. If readers don't like the suspense of waiting for the next issue they can always wait for the last installment before reading the story, as I do.

From one of the letters and your editorial, I see you place "The Thing" above "Destination Moon" and "When Worlds Collide". Having seen all three, I place "The Thing" as the poorest of the three; it more nearly approaches a Frankenstein type than the other two. By far the best movie to appear was "The Day the Earth Stood Still", both in plot and meaning.

Richard C. Spelman

Leverett D-34

Cambridge 38, Mass.

We take it you weren't bored after reading Madge, Dick. You can bet you never will be either! As to THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL, we agree with you—it was a fine picture; the only thing we still contend is that THE THING ranks right up there with it. So what was wrong with FRANKENSTEIN? The film can still get a shiver out of us! with

EVERYBODY'S WONDERFUL!

Dear Bill:

I could start out this letter by saying what 95% of your readers say in their letters. (They're so right, too!)—That your magazine is wonderful, positively (pardon the expression) "Astounding!"

By the way, while I'm on the subject of ASTOUNDING, what is your opinion of Campbell's magazine? I think it's pretty good. You know, you're always putting in a good word for other sf mags such as OW, but you haven't said anything about ASTOUNDING, or for that matter, GALAXY which is an excellent mag. So how about it, Bill, just a few words about them?

Well, I seem to have strayed from the subject—Madge. I was going to say that my subscription should tell you how much I like your magazine.

About Madge's covers, ever since that awful June, 1951 Bok cover, you've had Astounding (whoops, that word again!) covers. PLEASE—no sexy covers. You've improved Madge too, too much to have her knocked off her high rating with one or two inferior covers.

Jim Harper
355 St. Leger Ave.

Akron 5, Ohio

"Astounding" is a good magazine—we trust it will always remain one. However, it used to be a great magazine—and under the hand of its present editor too. We remember back in the late thirties what a terrific magazine it was. Ah, me, them were the days . . . As we said, Johnny Campbell's book is still a good magazine. Who knows, maybe John will decide to make it as great as it once was?—And in the meantime it does have dignity, which we admire.

"Galaxy"? We think it's a good

magazine — trouble is we can't be sure just how good. It might be easier to decide if the mag stopped trying to nip at Astounding's heels, a futile effort. Why not be just good old GALAXY and let it go at that? There's room for everybody . . . There you are, Jim, we made with a comment! wh

A NEW STANDARD

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Having read the March issue of IMAGINATION I would like to comment on the stories. REBIRTH by Daniel F. Galouye was the best in the issue and one of the finest stories I have read in Madge. For a new author, Mr. Galouye has certainly turned in a good story on his first try.

The cover story, DARK DESTINY, was not as good as CRY CHAOS! last year.

Here's hoping that you keep to the new standard that Dan Galouye set in the March issue.

Edward Scammacca

679 Sterling Place

Brooklyn 16, N. Y.

Madge has always had a good standard, Ed, and Danny boy fits right in with it. We agree however that he can add something of his own too! And we guarantee he will too—watch! wh

WAS HER FACE RED!

Dear Bill:

Just finished reading your editorial in the March IMAGINATION. Natch, after your buildup of Galouye I read his REBIRTH first. It was very good—in fact I liked it better than the lead novel, DARK DESTINY. Science fiction, like any other field, can always use new blood.

One more thing . . . you mentioned

J. T. Oliver in your editorial, too. When are you going to print something of his? I think he's got something—and I will be looking forward to some of his stories.

As for this adult stf controversy, it is an epidemic and nothing else—except possibly a waste of space . . .

Nan Gerding
Box 484
Roseville, Ill.

P. S. Okay, so I should have read the whole issue before commenting . . . Was my face red a few minutes ago when I ran across Oliver's story, THE KILLER in the March issue! I can now rephrase my question: when are you going to print some more of his work? . . . Nan

Glad you liked both Galouye and Oliver, Nan. Keep your eye on Dan especially. He's liable to give stf a whole transfusion! . . . wkh

UNKNOWN NO LONGER!

Dear Ed:

This letter is in regard to your unknown writer, Daniel F. Galouye. I read his story, REBIRTH, in the March IMAGINATION, and I must say that he should be an unknown no longer! His story was super and human, and above, all, clean reading. I think his writing ability is far above the average—and this goes for other established writers.

I am looking forward to other great Galouye stories in IMAGINATION.

Hazel L. Taylor (Nurse)
109 E. Ave. 45
Los Angeles Cal.

This seems to be quite an issue for the ladies' views, Hazel, and we certainly welcome yours—indeed, concur with them. Thanks for writing and drop us a line again . . . wkh

MIAMI FANS NOTE

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I've just finished the March issue of Madge and decided to go through the letter writing aftermath. First off, I'm looking forward to reading TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! by Dan Galouye in May after reading his REBIRTH in this issue. With all your editorial promise it should be a dandy. As for the stories in the March issue, otherwise, I won't try to rate them. Hardly any two readers agree anyway, and besides, I'm no expert on the subject. Just keep Madge the way it is, with as good or even better stories and I'll keep on reading it.

Now for some information. Can any of your readers tell me whether there is a fan club in Miami or thereabouts? Also, if there are any fans who would care to write. I'll answer all correspondence, bar none!

Here's a question for you, ed: when does Madge go monthly? How about it?

Joe Coltrane
744 N.W. 4th St.
Miami 36, Fla.

We're working on the monthly business right now. We'll give you definite details soon . . . wkh

OUR EYE IS GLUED!

Ye Editor Hamling:

Since both time and energy are limited I won't list all of the features of IMAGINATION which have thoroughly endeared it to me as, I suppose, a first letter should. Suffice to say that I have been a devoted reader of science fiction since entering college in 1946 and found that stf happily freed my imagination from the usual ruts. Today I look forward happily to each issue of IMAGINATION.

Congratulations on your discovery

of Daniel F. Galouye. REBIRTH is top grade material with a subtle beauty of style I hope to see more of in IMAGINATION. So bring on TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! and keep an eye on Galouye—he's good!

Donald T. Smith
60 Preston St.
Camden, N. Y.

And we'll look forward happily to your future letters, Don . . . wth

SAUCER PICTURES?

Dear Ed:

Picked up IMAGINATION for the first time with the January issue and have been engrossed with it ever since. A pity that it was hidden behind all the cheap rags at the newsstand.

I have followed the flying saucer phenomenon since its supposed inception in 1947, have read all the books available on the subject, and have four years of clippings. Being an amateur astronomer myself and knowing the difference between an illusion and a meteor, have come to the conclusion that interplanetary travel is here, no matter how unacceptable the idea is to the general public.

If you publish this letter, I would welcome any letters from Saucer enthusiasts, and have at my command several genuine saucer pictures taken by a friend of mine. Any takers?

Again, I would like to reiterate that Madge is one of the most thought stimulating publications in a long time.

Coral Lorenzen
Rte. 1

Sturgeon Bay, Wisc.
Shoot the photos in, Coral, and if there is an authentic note to them we'll publish them in Madge for all the readers. OK? . . . wth

ON STORIES AND FANS

Dear Mr. Hamling:

For quite a while now I've considered writing to you or some other science fiction magazine editor, but this is the first time I have actually done so. First of all I would like to say that I am a freshman at Cornell University and a fairly regular reader of IMAGINATION, GALAXY, ASTOUNDING & THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION.

My purpose in writing this letter is two-fold, to point out to you something which I feel you editors are neglecting in your selection of stories—the appeal on the basis of the story itself, the appeal to the ordinary man on the streets who picks up your magazine; and secondly, to sound off a little at the whole over-emphasis on “fandom”.

I do not insist on stories being scientifically accurate; I do not on the other hand go along with your November editorial's view that they should be full of rip-roaring action. Rather I say that the stories should be readable, feasible to some extent, and interesting. I do not consider Swain's novels even good action, let alone well written. However, Geoff St. Reynard's BEWARE THE USURPERS! was a real thriller, one which I enjoyed immensely, and helps put Madge in the No. 2 spot among my favorite magazines. F & SF is No. 1 of the four above mentioned.

Now to point two: I feel that this whole business of fan clubs, fanzines, conventions, etc. is highly ridiculous. But if people wish to amuse themselves with such a hobby I suppose it is up to them. However, why do they have to foist their idiocy on other people? I read letters in IMAGINATION which absolutely disgust me. Analyzing the cover,

the "illos", the format, the type, the editorials, the columns, the letter section, in fact practically everything but the stories! And when they do mention the stories they do so as if as an after-thought, and seem to judge them on the basis of who wrote them.

I think this over-emphasis of fandom loses Madge more sales than it gains. Your letter section and FANDORA'S BOX are appealing to science fiction fans and should thus be included, but I feel that both are too long and discourage people from buying the book. Another thing is your often hideous covers and the emphasis you place on them (why I don't know). I almost passed up the March issue until the title caught my eye. I thought it was just another cowboy-on-the-moon pulp. But how many people who feel as I do would have bothered to buy that issue and unearth in it that terrific story by Daniel F. Galouye, REBIRTH! That should have been your cover story—with an intelligent cover to go with it.

An added thought: thank God you don't publish serials. One big reason I never read *Galaxy* or *Astounding* regularly until recently was that every time I picked up a copy of either half the issue would be devoted to a serial.

In closing I would just like to say that this is in all probability the longest letter I ever wrote, much less to a magazine, and hope that I got my point across. Let's have more good stories and less emphasis on the other factors involved in the production of the magazine. And please think of the fan who reads for the sake of literature itself, not because it is his social life to be involved in science fiction.

Peter Cusack
611 E. Seneca St.

Ithaca, N. Y.

About the long letter section, Pete, best answer to that is your letter—which you will note took considerable space! As to fandom, we'll keep on the sidelines with that point and let the readers reply.

You say our covers are horrible? That's us being flabbergasted! And all along we thought we were providing a good balanced diet of all types of science-fantasy covers! We admit the March cover was not a photo-dyed masterpiece—but then, it wasn't meant to be. That was an action BEM type, thrown in for the variety we promise our readers. How about the beautiful McCauley symbolic job this issue? (Not because ye ed has his puss plastered across it.) Anyway, we don't feel the March cover was horrible. But you must admit one thing, Madge isn't a stereotyped magazine — we believe in good change of pace, and that goes for covers, illos, and stories. At any rate we're in there pitching to give you the best. If we do miss once in a while it will be purely accidental! with

HEY, SOME ISSUE!

Dear wh:

I'm a little late with my usual letter to Madge, but here it is.

In the March issue DARK DESTINY by Dwight Swain was my favorite! Get more DVS! He's colossal. Also, get more Malcolm Smith Covers—whatta job he did on March! Second in stories came REBIRTH. The plot is kinda old but I really enjoyed it. Only bad yarn in the issue was THE KILLER. You should have left those pages blank!

Rog Phillips is a lucky guy—wotta wife!

Illos are all terrific.

Letter column is always interest-

(Continued on Page 160)

The COMING *of the* SAUCERS

At last! The authoritative report on the sky mystery that has startled the world. The sensational result of over four years of investigation conducted with great difficulty and even risk of life. The first honest, undoctored, unbiased saucer book!

THE DOCUMENTARY RECORD YOU'VE WAITED FOR

By

KENNETH ARNOLD and RAY PALMER

Ever since Kenneth Arnold first saw the mystery disks, the utmost confusion has existed — due to official and unofficial censorship, hoaxes, false reports, biased analyses, publicity hungry yellow newspaper sheets and sensation magazines, military investigation, "classification" and "top secret" designations. Now this "amog" of misinformation is cleared away, replaced by facts, by the two men who know most about the disks.

PRIVATELY PRINTED - NO CENSORSHIP!

After four years of what amounted to official and public persecution, ridicule, fantastic accusations of trickery, the publishers of this book have decided to avoid even the possibility of editorial "Interference" in presenting the truth and nothing but the truth. They are printing a limited number of copies at their own expense, in an effort to prove their integrity and to set this very important matter straight. These copies are not being offered to book dealers, but solely to those persons vitally interested in the truth about the saucers!

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After publication this book will sell for \$5. Until the book is delivered by the binder, we will accept advance orders by OTHER WORLDS readers at the low price, Order NOW!

ONLY PREPAID ORDERS ACCEPTED — ORDER TODAY FROM

RAY PALMER

RT. 2, BOX 36

AMHERST, WISCONSIN

(Continued from Page 158)

ing.

And if this letter sees print, c'mon, fans, write me!

Bill St. John
5 Ayers Place
Oceanside N. Y.

Wow, some letter! wlh

REPRINTS?

Dear Ed:

As I've read everything published that could come under the heading of Fantasy or Science Fiction since the days of Hugo Gernsback, I am not interested in reprints of any kind. And your November issue of IMAGINATION definitely had a reprint in it, as I've read the story titled, BEWARE, THE USURPERS! It strains my imagination to pay 35c for any magazine and especially for reprints. I am not interested in fan magazine contents or any letter sections as both to me are so much clutter of someone wanting to see their names in print; I buy for reading material, not ads, gab, and yap.

The literary style of most old stories is out-dated and out-classed, and no matter how rehashed they don't sound or read appetizingly to me. Do not publish my name as I am not interested in arguments.

I. L. Russell
Robinson, Ill.

Sorry, but we do have to publish your name. The fact is you have made a statement that is about as true as if we tried to palm off the fact that the Moon is made of sponge rubber. Reprints? Great Fires of Ghu! Your editor has always been an outspoken critic of ALL reprints in magazines! As to IMAGINATION and the story you mention, preposterous. Let us simply state that you are misled in some manner; IMAGINATION has never run a reprint—and never will. BEWARE,

THE USURPERS! was written on assignment for Madge. The one thing we agree with you about is wasting 35c on a reprint magazine. But chum, you got the wrong book! . . . wlh

FIRST FAN LETTER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is the first time I have ever written any magazine, but now is as good a time as any to break the ice! First of all I would like to compliment Dwight V. Swain for his great story, DARK DESTINY in the March issue. I was enthralled through the entire story; it kept me right on the edge of my chair, and that's something! The next best was REBIRTH. It was excellent. Next best was RIDE THE CREPE RING, and then THE KILLER, with a perfect fantasy background.

The cover was one of the best covers I have ever seen on Madge, the beautiful colors made it really interesting. It had that eye-appeal!

Keep the Editor's page as large as it is and continue to make Madge the best science fiction book of all!

Melvin Bartusch
Box 316, R.R. 2
La Porte, Ind.

Thanks for the orchids, Melvin, and write us again soon. . . . And we'd like to remind all of you fans at this point that the letter you vote best in each issue will win the writer (of the winning letter) his or her choice of any interior illustration in that issue. So get your votes in fast! wlh

A FAN IS BORN

Dear Ed:

Just happened to pick up a copy of the March IMAGINATION (my first issue) the other day. I liked it so much I am subscribing!

Dave Ruckert

Rocky Ridge Road
Westport, Conn.

Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!
... *with*

TWO BEMS YET!

Dear Bill:

Wow! A third of my tubes blown after reading your letter column in the March issue—and looking at the cover! A nekkid woman and two BEMS yet! Seriously, your November editorial didn't stir me as it did some of Madge's readers.

Bill Venable's letter for instance. He attacks "psychosociological types of stf", "the dry and nonsensical type of thing that reads like Freudian and socialistic propaganda." Two stories that came to mind as examples were "Helping Hand" by Poul Anderson in the May '50 ASF which is excellent political satire, and "Situation Thirty" by Frank Robinson in the January '51 ASF, an ingenious psychological story. (Asimov has used both themes in combination.) I'd like to ask Mr. Venable a question which sums up my viewpoint on the adult science fiction question: Is a story any more SCIENCE fiction because it bases its plot on a gadget rather than a thoughtful attempt at scientific theory?

Then the sundry critics of "Galaxy". Looking over the January 1952 issue I remember three stories which a five year old could understand. I admit that the editorials have been snooty, but I thought that a magazine was judged by its stories. Gold has done all right there.

In conclusion, how about some more Matheson like "Letter To the Editor", huh?

Allen Klinger
917 Ogden Ave.
New York 52, N. Y.

Come now, Al, the gal on the March cover was not nekked or maybe we need new glasses! And as to the BEMS, you know the old saw about two heads being better than one! ... How'd you like the cover on the latest issue? ... with

THE STORY'S THE THING . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

"The time has come," the Walrus said, "to speak of many things . . . of ships and science fiction and readers arguing . . ."

I have been a fan of Madge for some time now and my frustration has mounted each month with the reading of letters in the reader's section. I must air my grievance or collapse. So here goes.

Every issue some ardent fans (of questionable intelligence) ask why the stories in Madge aren't "pure science" in nature. Great BEMS of Betelgeuse! These same people wouldn't look for a treatise on subatomic energy in a Sears-Roebuck catalogue so why do they look for "pure science" fiction in a science-fantasy fiction magazine? IMAGINATION is imagination—keep it that way!

The story's the thing. I agree with you, ed, 100%. A word then, about Madge's stories. They are Great. Swain is my idea of a first-rate author. Hurrah for the *Mal-yas*, *Chonyas*, and *Pervods*. Almost without exception I enjoyed the other stories too in the March issue. And to you, Bill Hamling, thanks for Madge, the *magnus* magazine!

Dick Anderson
4552 51st Ave. N.E.
Seattle 5, Wash.

*"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,
"You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?"
—Until our great next issue
It really has been fun! . . . with*

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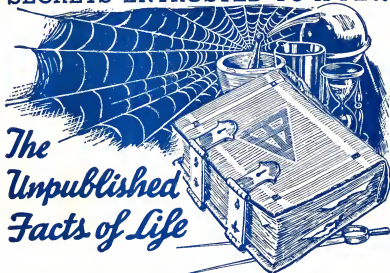
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TOMORROW'S SCIENCE

GASEOUS NEBULA IN ORION: Visible to our astronomers today, it will be within reach of our space ships of tomorrow. A "gas" cloud in our galaxy, science speculates it may be shattered remnants of a star system — or possibly the beginning of one.

Another scan
by
cape1736

